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FOR THE HANGMAN

(A **CRIME CLUB** *Novel*)

This is the Story

JOHN STEPHEN STRANGE is here seen in the form that made *The Man Who Killed Fortescue* quite outstanding among detective stories. "Mr. Strange's work will please you by its sound construction and strong detective interest," wrote Dorothy L. Sayers of his last book, *The Chinese Jar Mystery*. *The Field*, writing of *Murder Game*, said, "A really first-rate detective story," and of the same book the *Edinburgh Evening News* said, "A Crime Club publication which must rank as one of the foremost of its kind." And the *Daily Dispatch* said, "Will keep you awake even after a Sunday dinner." *For the Hangman* will keep you awake too. The author is here concerned with the murder of a thoroughly unpleasant, ratty little man who had occupied himself with finding out details of the skeletons in everybody's cupboards, and afterwards writing them up in a scurrilous newspaper. The murdered man, therefore, had plenty of enemies. The detective had a particularly difficult task in discriminating between many individuals who had ample motive for the murder.



By the Same Author

THE MAN WHO KILLED FORTESCUE	THE STRANGLER FIG
THE CLUE OF THE SECOND MURDER	MURDER GAME
THE CHINESE JAR MYSTERY	

FOR THE HANGMAN

JOHN STEPHEN STRANGE

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Published for
THE CRIME CLUB LTD.
by
W. COLLINS SONS & CO LTD
LONDON

A. S. Collyer

Acc no 8819

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S79 F

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823
S 81 F

Printed in Great Britain

For
ANNE and EDMUND DUFFY

CHAPTER I

Saturday, December 9. 1 p.m.

ON Saturday, December ninth, at one o'clock precisely, I got out of my car in front of the Haviland Street Club, rang the bell, and waited, shivering, for Charlie, the club steward, to come up from his kitchen and open the door. I did not know at the time that I was, so to speak, stepping into the first chapter of as baffling and bloody an affair as had occurred in the town of Baltimore for many years. Mystery writers to the contrary notwithstanding, one does not know these things beforehand. My only thought, during that moment of frozen waiting, was to get as quickly as possible out of the wind and snow and into the comforting warmth of the upstairs lounge.

The Haviland Street Club is a modest affair, housed in an old two-and-a-half-story house on a mid-town street not far from Charles. Its members are mostly professional men: doctors from the Hopkins, newspaper lights from the *Starpaper*, professors, a few of the writers who have recently discovered Baltimore as a pleasant and inexpensive place to live, and a sprinkling of business men who, in their spare time, profess an interest in matters intellectual.

Charlie is our one and only factotum. In his thin and active person he combines the offices of doorman, steward, cloakroom attendant, cook, waiter, and bartender. His name isn't Charlie, but no one can pronounce his real name—which is something strange and Slavic—except the professor of Romance languages at the university. So we call him Charlie.

He opened the door and grinned at me.

"Good-morning, Mr. Aiken. Not a very pleasant day, if I may say so, sir."

"Terrible," I assented, giving him my coat and hat. "Any one here?"

"Only Mr. Winslow Thompson, sir. He's preparing for his talk to-night."

"Well," I said, "let me have a Martini."

I went up the stairs and into the lounge. Winslow Thompson greeted me absently. He had set up a magic lantern at one end of the room and was focusing it on a sheet stretched against the opposite wall. The slide was a picture of what appeared to be a river with low, hardly distinguishable banks.

"The Volga," said Winslow Thompson reverently.

I sat down and waited for my drink and wished I had not come.

Winslow Thompson is one of those people who make you wonder why anybody ever joins a club. He's president of the Baltimore Midtown Bank, but that doesn't keep him from being a pretty boring fellow. You could forgive him if he were just a dull banker. After all, if a banker doesn't lose, steal, or otherwise mishandle your money, you can forgive him for being a bore. But Thompson affects—out of business hours—a dilettante interest in economic theory, and will talk your ear off, without encouragement, on the fallacies of Marx or the virtues of the doctrine of *laissez faire*, until you scream with pain. He capped the climax by going to Russia a year or so ago and taking a quick look at the U.S.S.R. He can't seem to get over it. Even when he is conversing on the most innocent subjects—the price of gin or the state of the stock market—you feel the Menace of Bolshevism lurking round the corner. Charlie brought my drink

"How about it?" I said to Thompson. "Join me?"

"I don't mind if I do."

He took the slide out of the machine, put it in a box, and switched off the light.

"All set," he said, pleased with himself.

Charlie appeared with another glass. He looked at Thompson apologetically.

"Mr. Boyd Jenkins called up just before you came in, sir, and asked for you. I should have told you, but it slipped my mind. I'm sorry, sir."

Thompson scowled at his glass. "It's all right," he said. When Charlie had gone, he went on.

"That fellow Jenkins is a pest—an odious little worm. Whatever persuaded me to put him up——"

"I've often wondered," I admitted, "how he got round you."

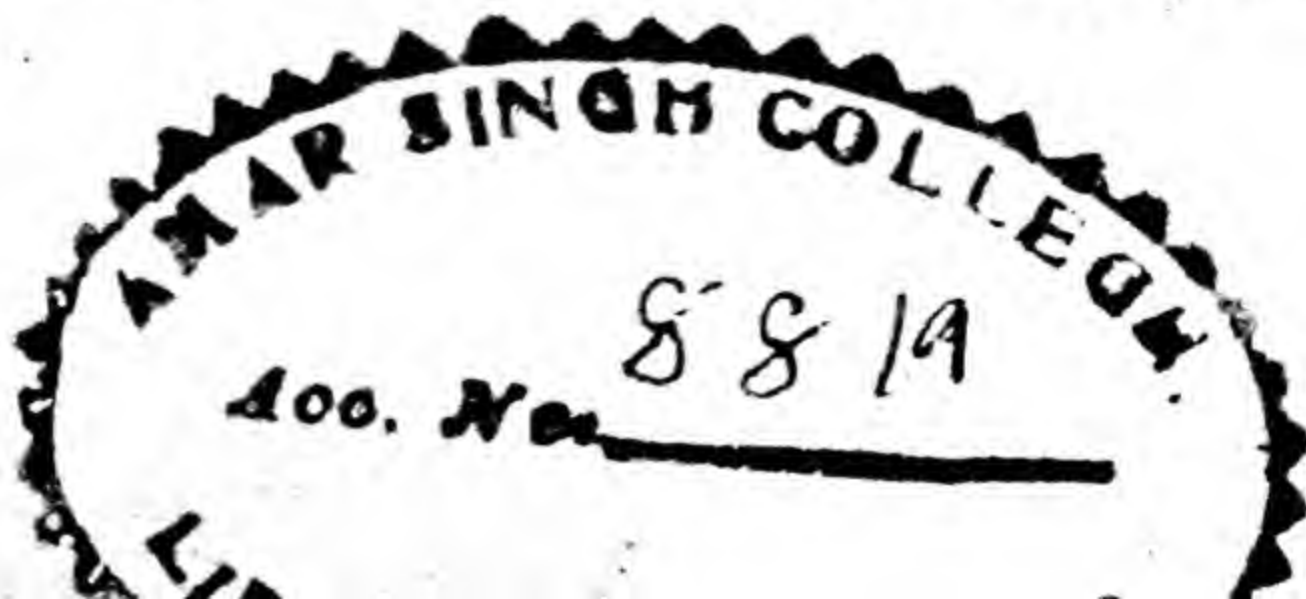
"Met him in New York," said Thompson, "and he took me about a bit—some pretty snappy speakeasies, all very quiet and nice."

I smothered a grin. Somehow I could not picture Winslow Thompson in a speakeasy, however quiet.

"He's a very funny fellow, you know," said Thompson defensively, "when he's on his good behaviour. I suppose he was watching his step, but I'll confess I never noticed anything wrong. Seemed to know everybody——"

So that was it. Like many dull people, Thompson is inordinately impressed by any one who manages to get around. But that, after all, rather made things worse.

Boyd Jenkins is a lousy little fellow, and any one with half an eye ought to have seen it at once. He writes under half a dozen aliases for as many varieties of confession magazines. Not that I hold that against him. Many a man more honest than he has done the same. But there's a nasty quality about him—a snoop-ing, sneering, ruthless—— Oh, well! I pulled myself up.



"Some day," I said, "he'll give us overt cause and we'll chuck him out on his ear."

Winslow Thompson looked at me uneasily.

"There'll be trouble," he said.

"There will," I said, not too pleasantly; "lots of it."

Looking back, in the light of subsequent events, it seems to me extraordinary that I didn't receive a more definite impression from the odd little series of happenings at the club that snowy day. But the fact remains that, at the time, it all seemed very casual.

Police Commissioner Mottram came in just as Thompson and I were finishing our cocktails. Marc White, of the *Starpaper*, followed him up the stairs, sucking at his inevitable pipe, and a moment later George Sutter arrived, beautiful as always in immaculate tweeds, with a flower in his buttonhole.

Sutter is executive vice-president of Thompson's bank—the Baltimore Midtown. He's a well-known figure in Baltimore; a bachelor much in demand at dinner parties, a great ladies' man, a raconteur of considerable reputation. There are conservative Baltimoreans who look askance, considering his interests too frivolous for a man in his position. But he is really a shrewd fellow. Very shrewd.

It's a wonder to me—— But there, I've said it before. And I did notice that he seemed disturbed and out of temper.

"Anybody seen Boyd Jenkins?" he asked.

"No," I told him, "but he called up a while ago."

"For me?"

"No," I said, with a dirty look at Thompson. "He asked for Mr. Winslow Thompson."

"So you're receiving his attentions too?" Sutter said more cheerfully. He devoted himself for a minute to the cocktail shaker, and then his feelings overcame him

again. "Know what he did? Called me up and ordered me to come round to his house at once. Told me I'd better do it, or——"

"Blackmail, eh?" said Mottram, grinning. "What have you been doing to put yourself in his power?"

"Not a damn thing," said Sutter, filling the glasses.

Marc White had finally got his pipe going to his satisfaction.

"What did you say to him?"

"I told him to go to hell."

That was one episode. The next happened perhaps half an hour later. No one else had come in, and the five of us had lunch together in the little dining-room. Charlie had produced an excellent steak and some very decent wine and we grew pleasantly convivial. I began to take a more kindly view even of Mr. Winslow Thompson.

We'd been talking about the latest achievement of my friend, Mordaunt Peel. A trifling affair really, but one that had interested me extremely. It involved only the sum of twenty-five dollars, extorted, by threats of violence, from a half-blind preacher in a West-Baltimore parish. It culminated in the prosaic arrest of an old man named Ruhrbacher, who kept a paint shop on Hillen Street. But to any one interested in the science of detection the story was a little masterpiece of expert observation, fine reasoning, and a brilliant stroke of imaginative reconstruction. My audience listened with absorbed attention to my account of the case.

"Golly!" said Marc White when I had finished.

"Beautiful!" said Mottram. "A classic!"

George Sutter sighed with pleasure.

"What a story!"

"But after all," said Winslow Thompson, "luck played into his hands. Finding that piece of cotton waste behind the sink——"

"But who else," I demanded, a bit hotly, I'm afraid, "would have seen that it had any connection with the case? Or guessed what the connection was? Peel's cases always look easy—afterwards."

"That," said Marc White sententiously, "is because he has style. It's like a painter. The best ones paint the simplest pictures—fewest lines. Looks so easy you could do it yourself. But," he added dryly, "just try it."

"The science of detection raised to an art," said George Sutter. "Good line, what?"

I could see it sprouting in an after-dinner speech.

"You're talking rot," said Mottram good-naturedly. "Art, my eye! Science likewise. Peel's a sensible fellow who uses his head and don't know when he's licked. Am I right, Jonas?"

My heart was warm within me. I let it go at that.

"I'd hate to have him on my trail," said Marc White. "How many times has he failed in the last ten years, Jonas?"

"Twice," I said.

I did not guess, when I spoke, how near he was to come to another failure. Nor how brilliantly that failure was to be averted.

Our discussion was interrupted by the sound of footsteps on the stairs, and a thin, rat-faced man in a dark overcoat and vivid scarf appeared in the doorway. He stood arrogantly, looking us over, and one could feel the atmosphere of the room congealing.

"Friend of yours, Mr. Thompson," murmured Marc White, sotto voce into the bowl of his pipe. He was coaxing it with a match, and after that one sardonic glance did not look up.

Boyd Jenkins' eyes travelled coldly from one face to another, and stopped when they came to George Sutter.

"I waited for you," he said, "but you didn't come."

"Naturally," said Sutter coolly.

Jenkins' thin, nervous mouth worked. For the first time it occurred to me that the fellow might really be dangerous. I wondered whether he might even be a little mad.

"I'd like to speak to you for a moment in the lounge," he said.

It seemed to me the banker was about to refuse, but he didn't. He shrugged ever so slightly, got up with a glance of apology around the table, and followed Jenkins across the hall into the lounge.

It was fifteen minutes before they came out again. Mottram and Thompson had both gone, but Marc White and I still lounged over the table, smoking and finishing our beer. I was frankly curious. I wanted to see their faces when they emerged. I was even a bit nervous. But nothing happened.

At the end of the fifteen minutes the door opened. The clatter of descending feet sounded on the stairs, and a moment later Sutter came into the room.

I could see that he was frightfully angry. His nostrils were pinched and his mouth a narrow line. He looked at Marc White.

"Did you know that Jenkins writes for the *Baltimore Scurrilities*?"

Marc dragged at his pipe, again recalcitrant.

"You did!" said Sutter accusingly.

"I didn't know," Marc corrected him. "I guessed. I guess lots of things. It's one of my pet pastimes."

Sutter went to the window and looked blankly down into the snowy street. After a minute he turned and without a word left the room. A moment later we heard the front door close after him.

Marc White and I looked at each other.

CHAPTER II

Tuesday, December 12. 11 a.m.

It was three days before the tragedy really got under way. I find, on consulting my diary, that it was on Tuesday, December 12, that Lucy Shanks came to see me about Philip Radnor. It was a disturbing interview, and as it played a large part in the tragic events that followed so close upon it, I will set it down now in its proper place, which is the beginning.

I had been struggling all that morning with the perverse opening pages of my new book, but by no feat of brute force and no trick of delicate legerdemain had I been able to instal the murder in the first chapter. I gave it up at last and sat scowling at the frosty window which since ten o'clock had framed a dismal prospect of falling snow that almost blotted out the faces of the red brick houses across the street.

There was nothing dismal about the room in which I sat. Rather on the dark side, as rooms in old Baltimore houses too often are, it was, nevertheless, within its slightly sombre limits, cheerful enough. The walls, broken by three long north windows and a dark oak door into the hall were covered with books. A fire crackled cheerfully under the scrolled white marble mantle, and the flowers which Violet insisted on made a spot of vivid yellow orange on a low table beside the lounge. This is the one room in the house which Violet enters only by invitation. I have always suspected that the flowers were a gesture of defiance—a foot placed in the crack of the door, so to speak.

The house was incredibly still. Violet—wise woman—according to her invariable custom, had gone on a

visit to her mother. Ten years of marriage to a writer have convinced her of the wisdom of absenting herself during the composition of the first three chapters. She sometimes finds it advisable to go away again during the difficult middle section. I accused her once of keeping a handbag ready packed in her closet for these emergencies.

"Well," she said with that particular secret smile which she reserves for any discussion of my peculiarities, "nobody enjoys being barked at."

Violet is a very aggravating woman. She is also unusually pretty. I believe she plumes herself equally on these two totally unrelated counts.

But I don't know why I keep harping on Violet—except that, a veritable King Charles's head, she is always popping up in my affairs in the most unsuitable and disturbing fashion.

I resented the silence of the house as I would have resented a noise—if there had been one to hear. I knew that Moose, our invaluable coloured house-man, had been trained by Violet's untiring efforts, and at my own insistence, to a practically cat-like quietness. I knew it was entirely on my account that vacuum-cleaners and similar modern conveniences were taboo in our establishment. But nevertheless at that moment I felt a definite sense of injury that our house was not like other houses with blaring radios, rattling pans, and other cheerful, commonplace noises. So I was delighted when I heard the ring of the front door bell, followed by the sound of Lucy's clear, vibrant voice in the hall below. I was afraid that she had come to see Violet and would go away on learning that Violet was out of town. So I went out to the head of the stairs and called down to her.

"Come on up and enliven the day."

I heard a little gasp, that might have been relief.

"Oh! Thank goodness! I was just telling Moose I had to see you and he was assuring me it was as much as his life was worth to interrupt you."

Moose grinned a wide, white-toothed grin, took her coat, and vanished. She came quickly up the stairs with that light, graceful step which is one of her great charms.

"I was about to commit suicide," I told her, wondering how a busy woman like Lucy could find time for noonday visiting.

"What a pity I interrupted you! It would have been such a nice compliment for Violet."

I held her hand a moment and indulged myself in a scrutiny of her charming countenance, glowing and cool under the cocked edge of her hat; brown eyes widely spaced, spirited mouth and firm, wilful chin. Her short brown hair was ruffled, and her firm, neat little nose distinctly red.

"My dear," I said, "you positively are a most refreshing sight."

"I like the fatherly tone," she said approvingly. And then suddenly her lips trembled and she burst into tears.

"Look here!" I protested. "This is very disconcerting. Come in and have a drink."

"I can't," she gulped, mopping her eyes. "I've got to go back to work in half an hour. Listen, Jonas, you've got to help me—or anyway—tell me what to do, because honestly I can't stand anything more. I've hardly slept for three nights."

I reflected enviously on the capacity of the young to stand punishment. Three nights and fresh as a daisy. My thoughts slid away from the picture of what even one night would have done to me.

I put her into a deep chair by the desk and gave her

a cigarette. Then I poked the fire while she got hold of herself.

"I suppose," she said at last, defiantly, "you've heard about that shindig at the Haviland Street Club last Saturday night?"

So that was it. I should have known.

"Well," I said with a grin, "in Baltimore things get about."

"Darling," said Lucy, "you have a gift of understatement which is simply divine."

"I've heard six different versions of the affair—very different. Suppose you tell me what really happened."

"That's the funny part of it, Jonas," said Lucy quietly. "I don't know what really happened."

For some reason or other this stumped me. I could have made the obvious humorous rejoinder, but I didn't. There was something in her face. Looking back, it seems as if, for me, the drama began at that moment—a curious sense of chill, of dread. But my subsequent knowledge of the affair may colour my remembrance.

"You were there," I said stupidly.

"Yes," she agreed, "I was there, and I wasn't drunk. I hadn't had a thing to drink since dinner. I'd been to the Griselli concert with Helen and Henry Clapp. Phil was working, but he said he'd meet us at the Haviland Street Club at eleven. He wasn't there when we got there, but a lot of other people were. Winslow Thompson had been lecturing on his experiences in Soviet Russia, with lantern slides, and the audience was reviving itself with highballs—or maybe it was vodka. Marcus White was there."

"Yes," I nodded. "He said he was going. I take it that Jenkins was there too," I added dryly.

For a moment Lucy stared into the fire. Then she asked:

"Jonas, do you think Boyd Jenkins writes for the *Baltimore Scurrilities*?"

"I know he does," I told her. Light began to dawn. It was pretty stupid of me not to have seen the point before. "He does a column of local gossip every week."

"I don't see the darn thing more than once a year," she said, and her voice was a little strained. "Has there been anything in it about me recently?"

I went over to the file where our periodicals are kept and took out the latest copy. It's a fairly lurid-looking sheet, tabloid size, on cheap green paper, and there's always an essentially nude lady on the front page.

"It's my favourite reading," I told her with a lightness I did not feel. "So full of noble sentiment and ignoble insinuations. I haven't looked at this week's issue. What have you been doing to get yourself into print?"

"I don't know, Jonas. That's the trouble, I don't know."

She got up suddenly, as though she couldn't keep still, and began to move restlessly about the room.

"It was all so absurd—a scene out of a melodrama. Phil came in about midnight and he was drunk. Phil doesn't ever get drunk."

"After all," I said mildly, turning the pages in search of the "Personals" column, "after all, even the best of us fall from grace sometimes."

"Well, anyway, he was drunk, and he barged into the room and walked up to Boyd Jenkins as though there was nobody else there. And before anybody could stop him, Phil knocked Jenkins down. Believe it or not. Just like that. And there was Jenkins sitting on the floor, rubbing his chin and looking like murder, and Phil standing over him with half a dozen men holding on to his arms. And Phil said: 'If you don't keep

your foul mouth shut I'll shoot you like a dog.' Word for word, Jonas."

I burst out laughing. Lucy let me have my laugh out.

"It's not really funny," she said.

And suddenly I saw that it really wasn't, although I could not yet believe it was as serious as Lucy seemed to think. I had found the half-dozen lines in the middle of the column. And they were, after all, nothing to tear one's hair about:

It has got about that Lucy Shanks is that way about Philip Radnor and that wedding bells soon will chime. Well, well, Lucy. Very well. This will explain a lot of things. Although we have always maintained that girls will be girls.

Lucy read it over my shoulder.

"After all," I said, "it could be a good deal worse. Radnor would have been wiser to leave it alone. Jenkins is a vindictive little worm."

"Of course it would have been wiser to leave it alone," wailed Lucy. "Why didn't Phil leave it alone?"

"Well," I argued reasonably, "you said he was drunk."

Lucy laced and unlaced her fingers nervously. When she spoke it was in a low voice.

"I'm frightened, Jonas."

I sat down on the sofa and drew her down beside me, remembering suddenly that Lucy was not a child but an extremely competent, sensible woman, buyer for the sports wear department of Hagadorn's, the biggest store in town. She was nobody's fool and she knew her way around. I was always in danger of forgetting these things, for I had known Lucy when she was six-

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teen, and her most serious anxiety had been whether "Mettlesome," her father's chestnut, would win the point-to-point.

"Why are you frightened?" I asked her. "You must have a better reason than any you've told me."

"I'm frightened," she said slowly, "because it all seems so trivial—and yet Philip is taking it so seriously. That was Saturday night, Jonas, and this is Tuesday, and I haven't seen him since."

"He's probably ashamed of himself," I suggested lamely.

"If he were ashamed of himself," said Lucy softly, "he'd come to me and say so."

"Why don't you call him up?"

"I did, Jonas. Last night I couldn't stand it any longer and I called him. His man said he wasn't at home. But he was at home. I could hear his voice telling Thomas to say he wasn't in."

By this time I had convinced myself it was nothing but a lovers' tiff. Not that I minimised its importance. I looked at her white, stricken face and sighed. I am not so old that I have forgotten the searing agony of such misunderstandings.

"My dear," I said, "I will see him at once. That is what you want?"

Her head went up.

"You won't do any such thing," she said crisply. "What do you think I am, Jonas? I've been snubbed once and that's quite enough."

"But, my dear, there must be some reason——" I said weakly.

"Of course there's a reason," said Lucy. "And I'm going to find out what it is. I won't be treated this way. I can't stand it. I want you to see Mr. Peel for me."

I looked at her in astonishment.

"How does Peel come into this?"

"I found this letter in my mailbox this morning."

She fumbled in her bag and produced a pink envelope—heavy, expensive paper, lined, incredibly, with baby blue. She gave it to me and I drew out the enclosure—a folded double sheet of the same paper. On it was printed in staggering capitals:

ASK BOYD JENKINS WHAT HE KNOWS
ABOUT "MADAM BUTTERFLY." YOU'D
BETTER DO THIS FOR YOUR OWN
PROTECTION.

There was no signature.

"Does it mean anything to you?" I asked her.

"Not a thing."

I turned the letter uneasily in my hands.

"Don't you think you should show it to Philip Radnor?"

"Of course I should. But how can I?"

"It's probably just some busybody trying to make trouble."

"You don't think," said Lucy crushingly, "that I believe that little worm could really know anything to Philip's discredit?"

I was suitably crushed.

"Of course not. But——"

"Jonas, some hocus pocus is going on that I don't understand. If Philip won't explain, I mean to find out for myself. I've a right to know. I'm going to marry Philip."

She looked magnificent in her hurt, angry pride. I sighed. This was not the way that our Victorian mothers would have behaved, yet I had to admit the justice of what she said.

I capitulated with the best grace I could muster.

"All right," I said. "I'll ask Peel to look into it—unofficially. Perhaps if he can find out who wrote it——"

"That's all I want," she said quickly.

"Very well, my dear."

She came over and put her hand on my shoulder.

"You think I'm a hound dog, don't you, Jonas?"

"My dear," I said, "prejudices die hard. It's always painful to a man like me to observe that any woman as pretty as you is capable of exerting good common sense."

She laughed shakily.

"Of course, it's all just a tempest in a teapot," she said. "There's nothing in it really."

"You're making a mountain out of a molehill," I assured me, recklessly piling metaphor on metaphor.

But I was wrong—how abysmally, horribly wrong neither of us had any means of knowing.

CHAPTER III

Tuesday, December 12. 11.45 a.m.

I ESCORTED her down to the door, never more conscious of my lame foot, and watched her hurry away through the falling snow.

"Moose!" I called.

He appeared from the nether regions with the startling suddenness of a rabbit jerked out of a hat. His widely grinning white teeth and short white jacket gleamed ghost-like in the dimness of the lower hall.

"I'm going out," I told him. "I'll be back for dinner and I may bring Mr. Peel with me."

His grin widened an inch.

"Yassuh. Would you like oysters and a mutton chop, suh, and maybe a little Brie?"

"And a salad," I said, struggling into my overcoat.

"And a salad, of course, suh."

I took my hat from him.

"A good idea."

I went out. Lanvale Street was silent and deserted.

It was a miserable day, raw and shivery, and the snow was of that fine, stinging sort that finds its way inside the snugest coat collar. It was coming down heavily now, in long, slanting lines, and the leaden clouds from which it fell seemed close and dark above the roof-tops.

I got into my car and began to crawl gingerly, by a series of back streets, down town.

It was twelve o'clock as I drew up opposite Clancy's, and locked my car. The strokes fell heavily, softly, from the unseen tower of Zion Church, and when they ceased, the city around me seemed hushed with the curious padded silence of falling snow. With an involuntary shiver, I pushed open the door and went in.

Here, at any rate, things were more cheerful. The electric lights were on full blaze, and Clancy himself, rotund and rosy, beamed at me over the shining mahogany bar.

Clancy is one of those men who, are so to speak, born behind a bar. I've sometimes thought that in his case it might have been literally true. Very easily I can imagine him as a baby sleeping under the bar, lulled by the rhythm of his father's cocktail shaker. I can imagine him as a small child playing soldiers with the whisky bottles. He had natural gifts. I remember him before the war, in his rosy-cheeked twenties, doing things with a dash of bitters and a twist of lemon-peel that beguiled the most fastidious and knowing tipplers in Baltimore. His father, old man Clancy—dead now these twenty years, God rest his pugnacious Irish soul—had perhaps a sounder taste in whisky, but even that

qualification of young Clancy's genius is a matter of splitting hairs, for nowhere in the state can you get rye with a smoother, gentler fire, or Scotch—but then no Marylander need inquire further than the rye.

Clancy's mother was French. I remember her well—a brisk, apple-cheeked old woman in a short black jacket—sitting on a high chair behind the cash register in the little restaurant that opens out of the bar in the rear. She had the blackest, sharpest eyes I have ever seen, and a gay, sharp tongue. In her day that was the only place in Baltimore where you could get really good French cooking. She died before the war, leaving young Clancy a sound knowledge of wines and a wholesome respect for the art of mixing salad dressing.

Young Clancy was still in France when prohibition came in. I happened to run across him on leave in Nice. I was still in the Secret Service then, and was on a job looking into the activities of an anarchist society with headquarters on the Riviera. We had lunch together, and I asked Clancy what he was going to do.

"I'm going to take a vacation," he said with a grin. "This ain't gonna last." But he had a bewildered, lost look in his eyes, hidden behind the boyish cheerfulness of his round face. I wondered.

A week later I got caught in the wreckage when I guessed wrong about the timing of the bomb thrown by one of my anarchists at the President of France. I was in hospital for a year having my foot tacked on again—it had been blown half off in the explosion—and I forgot about Clancy and his troubles. When I got back to Baltimore, however, I went to see him. He was still doing business on the old stand, but now there was a sinister locked door with a grill from which a suspicious eye inspected the visitor before admission. Young Clancy, I thought, looked slightly unhappy and a good deal older, but he was as cordial as ever.

When the curtain fell on prohibition, however, Clancy became himself again. He radiated. He twinkled. Years fell from him so that his growing corpulence seemed more like the chubbiness of an overgrown child. His cocktail shaker tinkled to the old, gay tune. The grilled door disappeared and the old swinging door, long cherished in paper wrappings, was rehung. The huge mirror behind the bar was festooned with laurel and framed with holly.

"What a Christmas this is going to be!" Clancy's seemed to say, "what a Christmas!"

Clancy nodded and smiled across the bar.

"Mr. Peel is here, sir—in the restaurant. The Commissioner is with him at the moment."

"Mottram?" I put up my brows. This was good news. The police commissioner was a busy man, and he did not often favour us with a visit unless it was on business. Something must be up. I was tempted to join the conference, but discretion won the day. I would know all about it in a few minutes anyway.

"In that case I'll have something while I wait."

I was sipping an altogether perfect Martini when Mottram came through the swinging door from the restaurant.

He was a big man with an open, handsome face and a quick eye, ordinarily very observant. But now, as he stood for a moment settling his muffler and drawing on his gloves, the eyes under his drooping hat-brim were annoyed and his lips were folded in a grim line.

"Hullo!" I said. "Have a drink!"

He turned instantly with his flashing, pleasant smile.

"Hullo, Aiken!" He came over and stood beside me. "Now that you mention it, it's a good idea. I need it."

"Trouble in the wind?"

He groaned and then laughed shortly.

"Ever met Mrs. Henry Clapp, senior? She's George Sutter's sister, you know."

"Know who she is," I said. "Never met her."

Mottram sipped his drink, frowning at his reflection in the mirror behind the bar.

"Her husband was old Judge Clapp. Used to be a power politically."

I smiled. No one could tell me anything about Judge Clapp. I'd done some political articles once that had involved a lot of unofficial investigation. I had my own ideas about him, but he had died in the odour of sanctity and I was not going to disturb his ashes, so I grinned.

But Mottram didn't even notice.

"The old lady's a poisonous old devil—and smart as they come. I wish I knew what her game was."

"Has she a game?" I asked. I was curious.

He tossed off the last of his drink.

"She usually has. You know that woman——" But words failed him. He pulled the brim of his hat down over his eyes. "No more, thanks. I've got to get on. Peel will tell you all about it, I dare say, but, for God's sake, don't put it in a book."

He nodded, waved a hand at Clancy, and went out. I finished my drink and went through the swing door into the restaurant.

My friend, Mordaunt Peel, was sitting at the table always reserved for him in the far corner behind the potted palms. It was still a bit early and the only other patrons were two stout Germans eating steak with onions and drinking beer near the outer door. I made my way between the tables, full of curiosity.

Peel was hunched over the table, his thin lips curled with amusement, his exceedingly sharp, hooked nose not six inches from the cloth. He had a pencil in his hand and a piece of paper before him, which he covered

with his coat sleeve as I appeared from behind the screen of palms.

"Hullo!" he said. "I've already ordered."

"For me?"

"For you."

"But I only decided to come twenty minutes ago."

"Ah! But I talked to Violet on the phone last night. What a girl! What a girl!"

"That's all very well," I said huffily. "What's up?"

But he paid no attention.

"A nice soothing luncheon," he said dreamily.

"Onion soup and——"

"Oh, shut up!" I turned away and hung my coat and hat on the clothes tree in the corner.

When I turned back to the table his pencil was busy again, and as I sat down I noticed, with a thrill of interest, that the sheet of paper was a delicate pink and that beside it lay a square pink envelope, lined with baby blue.

"What's that?" I asked abruptly.

"The amusement of an idle moment," he drawled, adding a few lines to his drawing. "And damn good, if you ask me."

"No, but——" I broke off, and waited with fuming impatience for him to enlighten me. It sometimes seems to me that even after twenty years of close association I know very little about this remarkable man who is my friend, but at least I have learned the futility of trying to hurry him. So I waited, with what patience I could muster, until he should see fit to enlighten me.

As I say, I have known Mordaunt Peel for many years. We were in the Secret Service together during the war and after, until that little affair of the anarchist's bomb in Nice, after which I abandoned, perforce, the investigation of real mysteries and took to the inven-

tion of imaginary ones. Peel, on his return from abroad, transferred to the Post Office department.

"What in heaven's name for?" I asked him when he told me about it.

"Because it's the best intelligence service in the world, bar none," he retorted with a grin. "A fitting stage for my natural talents."

"Chasing a lot of penny stamp snatchers." I suggested scornfully.

"You'll see," he said calmly.

And I had seen. I had spent twelve fascinating years seeing. I had watched his masterly handling of the Denver mail robbery, culminating in the arrest and conviction of the extraordinary little one-legged tailor in Houston, Texas. I had followed his unravelling of the mysterious and bloody affair known in the newspapers as the Murders of Bald Head Cove. And a hundred other problems, large and small, but all handled with a style, an intelligent simplicity of technique, that was really classic.

And suddenly it came to me, while I waited on his pleasure that snowy morning in Clancy's back room, that the first act of another drama had begun, with the characters waiting their entrances in the wings. I had only the slightest basis for this overpowering premonition—nothing but two ridiculous bits of pink paper and two pink envelopes lined with blue. But my nerves tingled suddenly with anticipation, so that I could hardly contain myself.

He signed his name with a flourish across the bottom of the paper and thrust it over at me. I burst out laughing. It was a sketch of Mottram, as he had appeared a few minutes before, annoyed, bristling, generally exasperated. Done in half a dozen vigorous lines with just a touch of exaggeration, it was really very good.

"I saw him outside," I said.

He nodded, took out a cigarette and lit it.

"He seemed very hot and bothered," I murmured. Peel yawned. "He was very hot and bothered."

"About this?"

"About that," agreed Peel. "Although what business it is of mine——"

I turned the sheet over and examined it.

The paper, as I have already said, was pink, and in size and texture identical with the letter Lucy had given me. On the envelope was printed: "Mrs. Henry Clapp, Sr., Mt. Vernon Place, Baltimore." Inside, also printed in the same staggering capitals:

SOMETHING IS GOING ON IN YOUR HOUSE
THAT YOU KNOW NOTHING ABOUT. YOU
MUST ACT IF YOU WANT TO AVOID A
SCANDAL.

"Look here," I said. "Are you making a collection of these things? Because, if so, I've got a contribution to it."

I took out my pink envelope. Peel pounced on it.

"Well, well. Birds of a feather. Where did you get this?"

I gave him a brief account of my interview with Lucy Shanks. But when I got through he only said thoughtfully:

"And Mottram's scared to death that some ghost from Judge Clapp's past will rise to embarrass the gang in the office. I pointed out that there were more obvious meanings to the word 'scandal,' but he didn't seem to think so."

He turned the letters, first one and then the other, in his hands, examining them closely.

"Same paper—same sort of pen and colour of ink,

same kind of printing. Mailed at same downtown post office. Lucy Shanks' postmarked 5 p.m. yesterday, Mrs. Clapp's postmarked 5 p.m. the day before. Now what," he murmured, "is the connection between Boyd Jenkins and the maison Clapp?"

The face of George Sutter rose before me as I had seen it on Saturday at the Club. I told Peel about it.

"He's Mrs. Clapp's brother, you know."

"Well, let them exorcise their own family skeletons. Why should I——" His voice trailed off into a yawn. "Oh, hell! What business is it of mine if Mottram's seeing ghosts?"

A rhetorical question, but it was to have an answer all the same: an answer that was both grim and bloody, and that was destined to absorb Peel's energy and exercise his wits to their utmost for weeks to come.

At this moment Tim, the waiter, bent over Peel's shoulder with a respect he would have shown to no one else of lesser station than a bishop.

"Mr. Clancy says there's a call for you on the telephone, sir."

Peel nodded and disappeared into the bar. A moment later he returned, and I knew at once that something very serious had happened.

He came back into our alcove and began to put on his coat.

"No lunch for us to-day," he said, and his lips were grim. "It was Mottram. He says Boyd Jenkins' dead body has just been found—shot through the chest."

"Where was he found?"

Peel looked at me queerly.

"In the vestibule of the house belonging to Mrs. Henry Clapp."

I looked at him a moment, paralysed with surprise and—yes—foreboding. Then I, too, put on my coat and hat and limped after him out into the snowy street.

CHAPTER IV

Tuesday, December 12. 1.30 p.m.

WINSLOW THOMPSON approached the door as he went out. The bank is just around the corner, and Thompson and Sutter often come in to Clancy's for lunch. He stopped Peel on the sidewalk.

"Just the man I wanted to see," he boomed impressively. "Wanted to ask you—— Isn't there anything you can do about a fellow pestering you—threatening letters—that sort of thing? This Boyd Jenkins——"

Peel paused with his foot on the step of his car.

"Boyd Jenkins won't trouble you any more," he said grimly. "He's just been murdered."

"Murdered!"

Thompson's mouth fell open foolishly. We left him still standing on the sidewalk, staring after us, his face blank with astonishment, and—yes, I could swear it—relief.

When we drew up in front of the house in Mount Vernon Square we found our old friend, Sergeant Bullitt, in charge. He was engaged in making a close examination of the front steps, while a cordon of four policemen held in check a small crowd of curious citizens who had gathered in spite of the snow.

He looked up as we approached, his square, weather-beaten face full of pleasure at sight of my companion.

"Hullo, Inspector, I thought you'd be along—although what your office has to do with this——"

"Idle curiosity, Bullitt."

"Oh, yeah?" Bullitt grinned disbelievingly. Then

he turned back to the steps. "Do you see what I see?"

There were six steps leading up to the vestibule door. They had evidently been swept recently, although the snow was beginning to film them again. Peel and I bent over the spot Bullitt pointed out, on the third step, near the left-hand rail. On the white marble there showed very clearly a reddish smear, striated, evidently by the bristles of the broom with which the snow had been removed.

"Blood," agreed Peel. "Where is the body?"

"In the vestibule. Haven't touched it. Doc Melzner hasn't come yet."

Peel looked through the glass door. Inside was clearly visible the hunched figure of a man. He was lying on his right side, with his back toward us. His hat had fallen off, disclosing dark hair, going a little grey. Small as he was, the width of the vestibule did not permit of his lying full length. His knees were doubled up, the soles of his shoes being pressed against the left-hand leaf of the glass door. His face, as far as I could see, lay almost against the sill of the inner door.

Peel inspected this apparition through the glass. Then he examined the brass door-knobs carefully.

"Who found the body?"

Bullitt pointed to a pale, elderly man in a worn overcoat who stood at the foot of the steps still pathetically clinging to his broom.

"The furnace man—Morse."

Peel beckoned to him, and the man joined us, shivering, I fancied even more from nerves than from the cold.

"Did you come out this way?" Peel asked.

"Oh, n-no, sir. Through the service entrance, sir."

"You swept the steps?"

"Yes, sir. And when I got to the top I looked in and saw——" He broke off with a shudder.

"Notice any footprints—in the snow on the steps, I mean?"

The man's lips twitched nervously.

"Yes—yes, sir. There was one set of prints, sir."

"Fresh prints?"

"Fairly fresh, sir."

"Going in or out?"

"G-going in, sir." He clutched at the rail, as if to steady himself.

"One more question and I'm through," said Peel kindly. "You needn't be afraid. Did you touch the door in any way—open it a bit to see better or anything?"

The man shuddered again.

"Oh, no, sir. I could see the blood on the tiles, sir, and it turned me sick. I never could stand the sight of blood. I ran for it, sir."

Bullitt took a hand in the game.

"Where were these footprints?" he asked.

"Up the left side of the steps, sir, close to the rail."

Bullitt looked down at the blood spot.

"About there?"

Morse looked too, and his blue lips grew bluer.

"Y-yes, sir."

"All right," said Peel. "You can go in now. But don't leave the house yet. We may want to ask you some more questions."

Morse bolted for the lower entrance and disappeared.

"Has the inner door been opened?" asked Peel suddenly.

"No."

"You're certain?"

Bullitt beckoned to one of the four uniformed policemen on the sidewalk below. He joined us on the steps.

"Schmidt, tell Mr. Peel what you did when Morse told you about the body."

"Yes, sir." He turned to Peel. "I was passing on my rounds at one-ten, sir, when Morse came down the steps. He could hardly talk, but I made out something was wrong, so I looked where he pointed, through the door, and saw the body."

"Did you touch the door?"

"Yes, sir. I opened it and leaned in, and examined the man to make sure he was dead, and to see if I knew who he was."

"You recognised him?"

"Yes, sir. He lives in that apartment house across the square, as I dare say you know, sir."

Peel nodded.

"Well?"

"I told the furnace man to stay there till I came back and not let any one up the steps. Then I rang the service bell and asked to use the telephone. The girl showed me one in the front hall—right inside there—in a closet, like. So I called in and they told me to stay where I was till the sergeant got here. So I waited in the hall, watching through the door, till Sergeant Bullitt came."

"And Morse waited outside?"

"Yes, sir. I could see him through the glass."

"Did you open the inner door—or did any one else open it?"

"No, sir. There was no one about except the maid, and I kept her there for fear she'd go making a fuss."

Peel nodded.

"Who's in there now?"

"Esslinger. He relieved me."

"So that there's been some one in the hall ever since the body was found?"

"Yes, sir, that's right."

Bullitt had been watching Peel curiously.

"Why are you so interested in that inner door?" he asked.

"I'll show you."

Peel opened the outer door carefully, hooking his gloved finger under the knob. He stepped in, straddling the recumbent figure. We crowded after him, and I propped the door open with my shoulder.

There could be no doubt that Boyd Jenkins was very thoroughly dead. He lay in a pool of blood that spread its sinister crimson over the black and white checker-board tiles. He was wearing a dark, heavy overcoat, which was unbuttoned; and the fingers of his left hand were crooked through the fold of his brilliant silk scarf, as though, when he died, he was trying to ease his breathing by loosening it.

It was at the scarf that Peel was staring. Now he bent down and touched it.

"This is why I'm interested in the inner door," he said.

I saw then what he meant, for a corner of the scarf was caught under the inner door. Peel jerked at it gently. It was firmly held. He straightened and stared thoughtfully at the closed door.

Bullitt tipped his hat over his eyes and stood for a minute scratching the back of his head perplexedly.

"Funny place to shoot a guy," he said discontentedly.

"He wasn't shot here," said Peel. "No smell of powder even in this confined place, and, anyway, the blood on the step outside. But some one knows he's here—some one in the house, who hasn't mentioned it."

He made a swift, careful survey of the vestibule—a survey interrupted by the arrival of Doctor Melzner, the medical examiner, and the experts from headquar-

ters. Peel left Bullitt conferring with them and descended to the street, with me at his heels. Here, to the intense interest of the small crowd of loungers who watched us, he doubled back and forth, searching, searching, first on one side of the steps and then on the other.

At last he found what he sought, and, beckoning me to join him, he pointed to it silently—another blood smear, this time in the trodden snow in front of the house next door, where the sidewalk had not been cleared.

It was an empty house, the glass of the vestibule covered with a painted board door. There was a lock on this door, but clearly it was not fastened, for I saw that the door stood open a crack, and that it swayed a little in the swirling wind.

Peel stood in front of the steps, staring at their snowy surfaces. The police cordon had been drawn beyond this point, but not until the snow had been trodden down by a dozen different pairs of feet. Peel grunted disgustedly. Then he ascended the steps and pulled open the swinging door.

I was close behind him and together we looked into the house. I say into the house advisedly, for both the glass vestibule door and the inner door stood wide open.

No careful examination was needed to disclose the bloodstains on the tiles and on the hardwood of the hall. We went in, and Peel shut the door carefully.

It was very dark inside and very still—a huge, cavernous old house. Our footsteps echoed eerily as we trod through the empty rooms. Peel got out his pocket torch and we followed the trail of blood. It led us along the high, panelled hall, past the open door of what must once have been a formal reception-room, into a high, square apartment with a very handsome

stained glass window at the far end; undoubtedly once the dining-room.

Here the trail ended in a dark pool before the hearth and the faint, acrid odour of powder—so faint that we would hardly have noticed it if we had not been looking for it.

I remember shivering. The place was like an icebox. But it wasn't all the cold: the shadow of death was in the room. I stood in a corner and watched Peel move around in circles, examining the floor almost inch by inch. Once he paused, his flashlight turned on a small object that lay approximately in the middle of the room, about three yards from the body. It was an empty shell, ejected from an automatic. He did not touch it, but inspected it carefully. Then he went on with his wary circling. Finally, when he reached the opposite wall, he stopped with a grunt of disgust.

"It's dusty all right, and there are plenty of smudgy prints but nothing clear enough to be any help."

He disappeared into the rear regions. I followed him and found him standing with his hand on the knob of a door that led from the back hall into the yard apparently. The door was locked and there was no key visible. Peel pushed open a section of the stained-glass window in the dining-room and leaned out.

"There's a covered passageway," he told me, "leading to the garage. That door must open on it." He drew his head in and closed the window. "Unless the murderer had the keys, he didn't leave this way."

"Then how——"

"Probably through the front door—unless he had wings. We may never know now." He sighed discontentedly.

We went back into the dining-room. And there we noticed something we had not seen before.

CHAPTER V

Tuesday, December 12. 2 p.m.

IN the shadowy inner wall, half concealed by the panelling, was a door. A closet, I supposed at first glance. But if so, it must be a shallow one, hidden in the thickness of the wall. An odd place for a closet.

Peel drew a sharp breath.

"Good Lord!"

He walked over and examined the door. He tried the handle, but the door was locked. Peel got out his flashlight again.

"Key on the other side."

He sighted along the hall. Then he took a cigarette from the pack in his pocket and lighted it, grinning at me through the smoke.

"What do you know about this house?"

"It belongs to the estate of David Sutter."

"And who," he inquired in the tone of a man encouraging a backward child, "who was David Sutter?"

I looked at him blankly and then the light broke.

"David Sutter," I said, "was Mrs. Clapp's father."

Peel nodded.

"Bet you a nickel this door opens into her back hall." And he rapped on it resoundingly. A moment later we heard Bullitt's voice on the other side.

Peel explained and we heard the sound of the key turning in the lock and the door opened. We stepped through into a dimly lit passage under a flight of stairs.

Bullitt regarded us curiously as he returned to its pocket the handkerchief with which he had wrapped his hand.

"What d'ye think you are?" he growled. "A Jack-in-the-box?"

Peel jerked a finger over his shoulder.

"Scene of the crime," he said, "if it interests you."

Bullitt glanced into the darkened room behind us. Then he called to one of his men and together they disappeared into the empty house. We went forward into the front hall.

The place swarmed with headquarters men now. One of them was doing things to the knob of the front door with powder and a fine brush. He straightened up as Peel approached.

"Heard you were interested in this, Inspector," he said. "Well, you won't get anything. It's been wiped clean."

Peel said nothing. Only his sudden stillness betrayed the fact that the information interested him.

"All right," he said at last. "Take a squint at the lock of that door in the back hall, will you?"

The man retired and Peel opened the front door.

Dr. Melzner was stooping over the body as we looked out. He straightened up and nodded at Peel. He is a stocky fellow, almost as wide as he is long, with a very German cast of countenance; a great eater and a great drinker and an enthusiastic member of the local Liedverein. But his convivial qualities were noticeably absent at the moment.

"Anywhere I can put this fellow?"

A middle-aged coloured man, evidently the butler, stepped forward.

"You-all kin take him in the liberry, suh."

I noticed that his face was clay-coloured with fear.

I helped to carry Boyd Jenkins' body into a big rear room which smelt of musty calfskin and tobacco smoke. Then I retired hastily into the hall, for I have never acquired Peel's unshakable equanimity and my stomach still turns uneasily at the sight of blood.

From where I stood near the stair rail I could look into

a large, handsome living-room, fresh with hot-house flowers. The scent of narcissus drifted out to me, accompanied by the cheerful crackle of a fire. And through a rear door I could catch a glimpse of a table laid for two, with a white cloth and a floral centrepiece.

A maid in a smart black uniform came softly down the stairs and spoke to me.

"Mrs. Clapp would appreciate it if you would step upstairs a moment, sir."

I followed her up the wide staircase, through the square upper hall and into a front sitting-room luxuriously furnished in the stuffily graceful manner of the eighties.

An elderly white-haired woman, elaborately gowned in black satin, was talking over the telephone at a small stand near the window. As I entered I heard her say: "Just a moment, please." She laid the instrument down and turned in her chair so that she faced me. A puzzled look came into her eyes.

"Sergeant Bullitt?" she said.

I introduced myself and explained my presence. Her fingers tapped an annoyed tattoo on the table.

"I told Bella to get Sergeant Bullitt. Well, well, no doubt you will do as well, Mr.—Mr.——"

"Aiken," I supplied. "Jonas Aiken."

"Mr. Aiken. I've just been explaining matters to Commissioner Mottram. I really must insist in having all these people downstairs removed. It's very upsetting that a man should have died in my vestibule. I'm very sorry and all that, but after all it's got nothing to do with me. I don't see why my house should be overrun, and I really cannot have it. The commissioner agrees with me. You talk to him."

The imperious old lady motioned to me to pick up the telephone and I obeyed her. In her day she must have been a very handsome woman. Her eyes were still hand-

some. And she had an air of some one long accustomed to deference and obedience. I wondered how much Bullitt had told her. But it was no business of mine. I spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Hello, Mottram. This is Aiken."

The Commissioner's voice sounded unnaturally subdued.

"I suppose it's really murder?" he asked.

"Not a doubt of it."

"I gather that Mrs. Clapp has not been informed?"

"Apparently not."

"Well, soothe her down, there's a good fellow," he urged. "She's just been giving me hell."

"How do I do it?" I inquired acidly.

He groaned.

"I'll be right over."

He hesitated a moment as though he were going to say something else, but then I heard the receiver click. He had rung off. I turned back to Mrs. Clapp.

"Mr. Mottram will be here in five minutes," I told her.

She was looking at me with a strange intent look.

"There's something wrong," she said. "Something I've not been told. Was that man—murdered?"

I could see no way out.

"Yes. He was shot."

"Where did it happen?"

"In the dining-room of the empty house next door."

She grew deathly pale. I thought she was going to faint, but she was made of sterner stuff.

"Ring that bell, please—the one by the door."

I obeyed her and the trim maid reappeared.

"Please call the bank and say if Mr. Clapp has not been found, to ask Mr. Sutter to come to me at once," she directed crisply.

The maid disappeared.

The old lady unhooked her cane from the back of her chair and got to her feet.

"I'll go downstairs now and find out what is going on in my house."

I tried to stop her.

"Nonsense!" she said. "I've lived a long time. I'm not afraid of dead people."

Her own remark seemed to suggest something to her, for she turned in the doorway and looked at me sharply.

"Have they identified the murdered man?"

It was no use trying to lie to her. I was conscious of the fact that Peel would heartily disapprove of the way I was conducting this interview, but I could not help myself. She overawed me, this little old lady with her black satin and diamonds and old-fashioned ebony cane.

"Yes," I said. "He's a Mr. Boyd Jenkins."

For a moment she looked at me with a singular sharpness. Then her lips folded together in a grim line.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish!" she said, and preceded me downstairs, disdaining my proffered arm.

As we descended, two men carrying a covered stretcher passed through the lower hall and out at the front door.

Peel, with Sergeant Bullitt and Dr. Melzner, came out of the library. The doctor was drawing on a pair of enormous knitted gloves.

"All right, all right," he was saying irritably. "I admit it is a cold day, *Gott im Himmel*, I should think so."

"And that would hasten rigidity?" suggested Peel mildly.

"Naturally. Have I said not? Am I an ass?"

"Then surely not two hours, Doctor."

"Listen!" Melzner, having finished with his gloves, placed his right forefinger against my friend's breast as though he were taking deadly aim with a revolver.

"Am I a magician? Can I read the stars? No! It is poppycock to say you can tell how long some one is dead. Very well. I say two hours is the limit, you understand? Now you can suit yourselves: two hours—one hour—it is all the same to me. But not more than two or less than one. Between twelve and one o'clock. So!"

And with an expressive shrug of his shoulders, he pulled his hat down over his eyes and strode out of the house, picking up his black doctor's bag from the hall table on the way.

Peel chuckled and at that moment his eyes fell on us. He came forward at once, removing his hat as he came.

"Mrs. Clapp? I'm Post-Office Inspector Peel. Mr. Mottram turned your letter over to me for tracing."

She looked him up and down with her bright, imperious eyes. Then she looked at Bullitt.

"Sergeant Bullitt, I presume?"

"Yes, ma'am." He came forward in his turn, fumbling his hat in his hands.

She looked from one to the other and her stick tapped impatiently on the stair tread.

"Well? Why am I not told what is going on?"

It was extraordinary the effect she had on us all. The policeman in the hall, Bullitt, the servants, all gaped at her as if she had been royalty. All but Peel. His attitude was perfectly courteous, but he would have been just as courteous to the scrubwoman whose duty it was to wash the steps on which she stood. There was a profound and penetrating question in the look he turned upon her. There was a suggestion of menace in his answer to her question.

"I do not know what has been going on, Mrs Clapp. That is what I am here to find out."

Her manner underwent a subtle change.

"Surely that idiotic letter has nothing to do with—this?"

"I don't know," he said again. "If you'll come into the library a moment there are a few questions I would like to ask you."

He stood aside to allow her to precede him, and she sailed into the library, irritation in every muffled click of the rubber-tipped cane. Bullitt and I went in too.

Peel was about to shut the door when a woman appeared in the hallway. She thrust past Peel into the room.

She was a middle-aged woman with a plain, rather soft face, blurred around the edges, if you know what I mean. She was dressed for the street in a plain black suit that would have been smart if the figure under it had not been so dowdy, and a plain black hat worn at the wrong angle. On her feet were a pair of black galoshes, neatly fastened all the way to the top. She seemed to be at the point of hysterics.

"What has happened, Mrs. Clapp? The policeman at the door says I am not allowed to go and they have taken my bag from the hall table."

"Be quiet, Matilda," said the old lady brusquely. "A man named Boyd Jenkins has been killed and the police——"

She was interrupted by a sudden irruption of noise in the hall. The front door was flung open and Dr. Melzner could be heard talking in a mild bellow.

"This is not my bag. The verfluchte thing is full of woman's stuff. Where is my——" He appeared in the doorway, spluttering with rage, a black bag dangling half open in his hand. He glanced without interest at us, spotted his own bag on a side table, grabbed it up and departed, leaving the other bag in its place. The woman in black seized it, and fumbled in it as though to make sure the contents had not been tampered with. Her back was turned and I could not see her face, but I saw her body stiffen. A moment later the catch snapped and she

turned again to Mrs. Clapp. I remembered afterwards that she seemed pale and shaken.

"Will I be permitted to go now?" she asked.

Mrs. Clapp turned to Peel.

"Matilda Wren is my hairdresser. She came this morning to dress my hair."

"At what time?" asked Peel politely. His lids were drooped and he seemed only perfunctorily interested. No one who did not know him well would have been aware of the absorbed attention he was giving to the scene in progress.

"At half-past eleven." Miss Wren answered his question herself, brusquely.

"And you were with Mrs. Clapp until—when?"

"Until after one. I had just gone into the back room to change into my street clothes when the police came."

"Miss Wren is giving me treatments," interpolated Mrs. Clapp, "which take some time."

"And since one o'clock"—Peel glanced at his watch.

"It is now nearly half-past two. You have been dressing all that time?"

Miss Wren gave him a venomous look. It was clear she did not want to answer but she had no choice.

"I came down the first time about half-past one but the man at the door was so rude to me it—it upset me and I went down to the housekeeper's room. I was all shot to pieces."

"And she gave you something to—er—buck you up?" suggested Peel.

Miss Wren flushed and gave him another furious baffled look.

"She wasn't there, but I knew she wouldn't mind."

"Oh—quite," murmured Peel with a half smile. "I suppose that was when you left your bag on the hall table?"

"Yes," she snapped resentfully.

Peel went to the door and beckoned to some one out of my line of vision. A moment later Officer Schmidt entered. Peel pointed to the bag.

"Do you remember whether this bag was on the hall table when you came in to telephone?"

"Yes, sir, it was. I remembered it special because I wondered if anybody was sick. It looks like a doctor's bag, sir."

"So it does," said Peel. "That will be all, officer."

Schmidt withdrew and Peel looked at Matilda Wren.

"It won't do, Miss Wren. That bag was on the hall table when the police arrived. I suggest it had been there for some little time before that."

Miss Wren looked as if she wanted to slap him.

"I can't tell you the exact moment I put it there," she snapped. "When I'm working I don't keep my eye on the clock."

"Very commendable," said Peel politely. "Perhaps Mrs. Clapp can help us. Do you know when Miss Wren came downstairs, Mrs. Clapp?"

Mrs. Clapp looked at her hairdresser and chuckled grimly.

"Don't be an ass, Matilda," she said crisply. "Nobody's fool enough to think you shot Mr. Jenkins. Yes, I know when she came downstairs. I looked at my watch. It was a quarter to one."

"Let me refresh your memory, Miss Wren," Peel said softly.

"You came downstairs at a quarter to one, opened the door to go out and saw the body in the vestibule. You were frightened—naturally. So you shut the door again. Then you remembered about fingerprints—no doubt you read detective stories, Miss Wren?"

She looked sullen and did not answer.

"Nothing to be ashamed of," said Peel cheerfully.

"So you wiped the door handle, and put your bag on the hall table and went into the housekeeper's room to get something to steady your nerves——"

"No, I didn't," cried Miss Wren, triumphantly.

"You think you're smart, don't you?"

Peel was watching her with extraordinary intentness.

"I am smart, Miss Wren. I had it almost right, didn't I? Where did I go wrong?"

She stared at him but did not answer.

"Wait a minute," said Peel softly. "Wait a minute."

His voice had a quality that I recognised. "Let's get it straight. You came downstairs——" He broke off.

And then suddenly he said softly: "The bag! That's it, of course. The bag! What was the matter with the bag when you opened it just now?"

Her face blanched to the colour of dirty paper.

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

"Give it to me!"

"You've no right. You can't search a person's things without a warrant——" She was talking wildly, between blue lips that scarcely moved.

Peel smiled at her.

"Why don't you want me to look?"

"It's just my trade stuff—tonics, lotions—that sort of thing."

"Well?"

She let him take it from her but only, apparently, because she was too paralysed to resist. A moment later her reason was apparent. Peel withdrew his hand and in the palm he held out for our inspection a small automatic.

CHAPTER VI

Tuesday, December 12. 2.30 p.m.

MRS. CLAPP exclaimed softly. Matilda Wren hid her face in her hands. Bullitt stared as though he had seen a ghost. Then he sprang forward, and wrapping his hand in a clean handkerchief, took the gun and examined it closely.

"Yes," he said. "One shot fired."

But Peel had not finished with Matilda Wren.

"Now," he said. "I'll correct my story. You came downstairs at a quarter to one and put your bag on the table. It's a wretched day and you weren't feeling very fit—right?"

Matilda nodded without looking up.

"So you went to the housekeeper's room and what with one thing and another it was—perhaps ten minutes before you returned to the hall?"

"About that," said Matilda sniffing.

"You picked up your bag and opened the door and saw the body lying there. Then, as I said before, you wiped the handle, put your bag on the table and—— What did you do then?"

"I went back to the housekeeper's room—and stayed there."

"And that's what really happened?"

"Yes," said Matilda Wren uneasily, "although how you knew it beats me."

"Did you recognise the dead man?"

"Yes. I knew him by sight."

"And didn't you know that you ought to give the alarm?"

A curious spasm contorted her white face for a moment.

"I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of getting mixed up in a murder scandal. It would ruin my business."

Peel nodded and glanced at Bullitt. The sergeant lumbered forward, the revolver in his hand.

"Ever see this before?" he asked.

She threw a terrified glance at it and looked away.

"No."

"Or one that resembled it?"

"No."

"And you've no idea who put it in your bag?"

"Certainly not."

"Didn't put it there yourself, did you—when you got through using it?"

She looked wildly from Bullitt to Peel and back again.

"I swear I didn't."

"When was the first time you saw it?"

"Just now—when that man brought my bag in here, half open, and I looked to see if he'd dropped anything out. I saw it then."

"Why didn't you tell us about it?"

She answered reasonably enough but I had an odd feeling that her answer wasn't the true one, nevertheless.

"Because I was afraid."

Bullitt looked across at Peel.

"That's all, I guess. I'll want your address."

She gave it and he said sternly:

"You can wait outside, Miss Wren."

"Can't I go now?"

"Certainly not. You'll be needed for further questioning."

She turned with a gesture of frantic, terrified appeal to Mrs. Clapp. For a moment the old lady transfixed

her with a bright, piercing look. Then she said crisply:

"Don't be a fool, Matilda. My son will be here any moment now. He'll look after you."

Without a word Matilda Wren left the room.

Peel turned to the old lady.

"Your son, of course, is Mr. Henry Clapp, Jr., of the Baltimore Midtown Bank?"

"Yes. He lives here with me. I sent for him at once, when the police arrived, but he had gone out to lunch. His secretary is trying to get a message to him."

Peel nodded.

"Perhaps you will tell me about your household. A matter of routine, you understand."

I fancied she did understand very well, but she complied with his request in a very matter-of-fact way.

"My household is small, Mr. Peel. Since Judge Clapp's death two years ago it has consisted of myself, my son Henry, and his wife, Helen."

"They have children?"

"They have not," said the old lady crisply. "Helen is artistic. She prefers a career."

"You have other children?"

"No. My little daughter died years ago."

And I saw for an instant the unhealed scar that mothers of dead children carry to their graves.

"Your daughter-in-law—is she in the house?"

"I suppose she is. She has her own apartments, and her studio, on the third floor. I have not seen her to-day. If you will ring for Joseph, I will inquire."

I rang and Joseph was sent in search of young Mrs. Clapp.

"You were acquainted with Mr. Boyd Jenkins?" inquired Peel.

The old lady's lips drew together in a thin line.

"I have met him."

"He was perhaps a friend of your son and his wife."

"I believe so. Young people are much less exacting now than they were in my time."

"You did not approve of this friendship?"

"Mr. Jenkins was what used to be called a yellow journalist of the lowest type. I could not receive him in my house."

"Your son does not agree with you in this matter?"

"My son's mind is no longer his own, Mr. Peel. My son's wife, it appears, has studied the more liberal modern philosophies, and has abandoned the use of good, old-fashioned Anglo-Saxon words in favour of modern euphemisms." For a moment the old lady's grim demeanour gave way to a faint twinkle. "At her age, Mr. Peel, I did not use the word 'adultery' but I knew what it meant."

Peel's mouth twitched.

I stood by, entranced. I wanted this to go on and on. Bullitt, I could see, was less complacent. He evidently did not see that this was getting us anywhere.

"About the anonymous letter, Mrs. Clapp," Peel went on. "Have you any idea at all who could have written it?"

"If I had, I would have dealt with it myself."

"You've no idea to what it refers?"

"It doesn't refer to anything, of course. A flight of imagination on the part of some crank. I wish now I had torn it up—as I very nearly did when I received it."

"You still think it had no meaning—even though Mr. Boyd Jenkins has just been shot, in a vacant house belonging to you, which has a door communicating with the rear hall of the house where you and your family live?"

It was a body blow and in spite of her amazing self-possession the old lady showed it. The little hand on the crook of her cane—a hand that was like a delicate carving in old ivory—trembled.

"That door has not been used for years, Mr. Peel. When the house was first leased after my parents died, that door was locked. It is true that the house has been vacant for a year now, but that door has remained locked. When the real estate agent has occasion to show it, he uses the street door."

At this moment a diversion occurred. The door into the hall opened and a woman appeared in it. After a quick glance at us she came in and crossing the room, stood in front of Mrs. Clapp.

"What is all this about Boyd?" she asked in a low, intent voice.

"Mr. Jenkins has been murdered, Mrs. Clapp," said Peel quietly.

She did not turn.

"And I suppose," she said to her mother-in-law, "you have been giving him a good character."

There was no venom in her voice. She spoke quietly, as though she were making a simple statement of fact.

"My dear Helen," said the old lady equably, "I have a right to my own opinion."

"Oh, certainly," Helen Clapp turned then and looked at us, and we looked at her.

My first impression was that she was not pretty; my second that she was probably the most interesting woman I had seen for a long time.

She was about thirty, with a thin, colourless face and brown hair pushed impatiently back from her forehead. Her figure, without being thin, was slender and well modelled. She wore her clothes carelessly, as though at the moment she could not be bothered, yet she had an air of smartness that many a woman *bien soignée* could never hope to equal. It was a thing of the spirit, I surmised—a sort of intellectual *chic*.

"Well," she said, "Joseph has been telling me. Which of us do you think did it?"

"I haven't seen your husband yet," said Peel, bowing slightly.

She laughed.

"Oh, Henry won't be any help to you. I'm a much better suspect—as Mrs. Clapp will tell you. Besides there's a door from my studio into the next house."

Bullitt jumped as though he had been stung. Helen Clapp turned amused eyes on her mother-in-law.

"Didn't you tell them, darling? How loyal of you."

"Don't be silly, Helen. That door was nailed up years ago."

"Don't I know it? I had quite a horrible time getting the nails out. But I simply had to have some way of getting in and out, except past your sitting-room door, darling."

She touched her mother-in-law's shoulder with not ungentle hand—a gesture that was at once an apology and an assurance. The old lady looked suddenly very much older. There was something terribly cruel about that acute contrast of vital youth and once vital age. And yet I was sure that Helen Clapp did not mean it so. I even divined suddenly a strong bond of unwilling, jealous liking between those two—as though they might have been friends if they had not both loved the same man and lived in the same house.

I grew more and more curious to see this Henry Clapp. My guess was that he would be a stuffed shirt. No one who was not pretty fatuous or pretty weak would have allowed a situation like this to develop under his nose without doing something about it.

But my speculations got no farther for at this moment Peel made a suggestion.

"I think, Mrs. Clapp, as a matter of form, we must see this door you speak of."

"Why, certainly."

Helen Clapp led the way upstairs and Bullitt, Peel,

and I followed. Mrs. Clapp, Senior, watched us go with a face grown suddenly wooden and enigmatic.

The black walnut stair rail, smooth and shiny as a piece of satin ribbon, curved up without a break through the dim hall, past the open doors of the second floor bedrooms, past Mrs. Clapp's sitting-room and up again to the third floor. Here Helen Clapp threw open a door and we went in. But the stair rail went on to still another flight, where, presumably, it stopped under the domed, multicoloured skylight that capped the stair well.

The room into which young Mrs. Clapp led us was big and bare, high ceilinged, with a huge north light set into its outer wall so that one side of the room was made almost entirely of glass. In the chill light that filtered through falling snow and frosty glass, the white plaster walls took on a blue tone indescribably cold.

The place was full of plaster casts and nude figures, several of them of more than human stature and all of them distinguished by the curious flat surfaces and geometrical lines that made much modern art so incomprehensible to me. And yet I had an impression that this stuff was probably good. There was a bust of old Mrs. Clapp, instantly recognisable in spite of its strange treatment, that was as shrewd a comment on the old lady as one could desire. My respect for Helen Clapp, already great, deepened. It was clear that the girl really worked at her trade and was no idle society dabbler. I found myself looking with curiosity at the covered clay on the stand near the window. Evidently she had been working on it when she was interrupted. Her tools still lay in place; her work smock was thrown over a chair near by. I wondered what it was.

Bullitt had gone straight to the door in the side wall and was examining it closely. Mrs. Clapp followed him.

"This used to be the nursery years ago," she said.

"Old Mrs. Sutter's room was just the other side of the wall. The door was knocked through——"

I lost the thread of what she was saying. I was watching Peel. His eyes, like mine, had focused on that lump of clay on the work stand with its covering of wet white cloth. Swiftly, quietly, he crossed the room and lifted the cloth. The thin, meagre face of Boyd Jenkins stared out at us from the rough, unfinished clay.

CHAPTER VII

Tuesday, December 12. 3 p.m.

EVIDENTLY Helen Clapp had been watching, too, for she started forward, too late, with an involuntary cry of protest. Peel looked at her and she stood as still as one of her own statues and almost as white.

"What time was he here?" asked Peel.

For the first time I saw her shaken, but she rallied quickly.

"He came about half-past ten, I suppose. I know he left at twelve-thirty, because he looked at his watch and said he had an appointment at a quarter of one."

"What appointment?"

"He didn't say."

Peel stared at the clay face, so strikingly like that face of cold, human clay which Melzner had just carted off to the morgue. Helen Clapp was staring at it, too. A fit of trembling seized her. She clasped her hands as if to steady them and then suddenly turned her face away.

"Oh, for God's sake, cover it."

Peel let the damp cloth fall back in place.

"Now," he said, "are you ready to tell us all you know about this?"

"But I don't know anything—anything. I am most horribly in the dark. He came here this morning for a sitting—by appointment."

"He had, of course, been here before?"

"This was the fourth sitting."

"All recent?"

"Saturday a week ago, Tuesday and Thursday of last week, and to-day."

"And he came in through the house next door?"

"Yes."

"How was that? Had he a key?"

"No." For a moment she twisted her hands uneasily. "I suppose I must tell you," she said at last.

"You'd so easily find out anyway."

"It would simplify matters," Peel agreed.

"Most of our friends have taken to coming in that way since the house has been empty. I couldn't stand—really, I couldn't stand listening to comments about the people I chose to have here—Mrs. Clapp—Well!" She broke off. "Anyway, I used this stairway a great deal."

"And the door downstairs?"

"The vestibule door was left unlocked, and we kept a key to the inner door in the vestibule."

"So that anyone could have let themselves in?"

"Any one who knew about the key—yes."

Peel went off on another tack.

"You know Lucy Shanks?"

"She's a close friend of mine."

"And her fiancé, Philip Radnor?"

"Yes," she said guardedly, "I know him."

"Miss Shanks told Mr. Aiken about that scene at the Club the other night," said Peel gently. "Do you think Mr. Radnor meant what he said when he threatened Boyd Jenkins?"

She flung back her head defiantly.

"I don't know whether he meant it or not. I'm not a mind reader. But if you think Philip Radnor did this, Mr. Peel, you're all wrong. It's not in his character."

Peel ignored her defence of Lucy's fiancé.

"Has he ever been in this house?"

She nodded, watching him closely.

"A number of times."

"Does he use the stairway next door?"

"Yes."

Peel took a pink envelope from his pocket.

"Did you know that Mrs. Clapp, Senior, had received an anonymous letter?"

She grew white as one of her own plaster casts.

"No."

He showed it to her. I could see that she read it twice and wondered if she were giving herself time.

"Have you any idea to what it refers?"

She frowned thoughtfully. One had to admire her self-control. After a moment she looked up, meeting Peel's eyes.

"You are thinking of this stairway."

"Yes."

She shrugged.

"It's possible—although what the implication is, I have no idea."

"Not Mr. Jenkins' visits?"

She crimsoned angrily.

"If that is so, I can only say the suggestion is the grossest slander. I like—liked Boyd Jenkins. He had an odd sort of ruthless passion for truth which I admired. He was like a dog worrying at a bone until he had got at the truth of a person or a situation. But I never was really fond of him. He was too brutal—without any compassion. We were hardly even friends. He used to come here a lot. He was very amusing.

and recently he came to pose. There was never anything more."

"Didn't it occur to you that it was dangerous to be on such informal terms with such a man?"

Helen Clapp's head went up and she surveyed him coolly.

"I don't know about danger, Mr. Peel. I can take care of myself."

Peel took the letter from her and returned it to his pocket.

"Can you think of any one who might have written this?"

She thought a moment.

"No one."

"Now to return to this sitting. Did Mr. Radnor know that you were doing a bust of Boyd Jenkins?"

She looked at Peel with a level gaze.

"I'd rather not answer that."

Before Peel could press the point an interruption occurred. A new voice spoke from the open doorway behind me.

"It would probably be better, Helen, to answer frankly. If Phil is innocent, you will do him no harm."

I turned and looked at Henry Clapp, Jr. And I received a distinct shock. This man was neither weak nor stupid.

He was a handsome man in his middle forties with a head of blond curly hair and a high colour. What one would call a fine figure of a man; well set up, and wide in the shoulder. A splendid physical specimen endowed with all the assurance of manner that was natural to his class and position.

But there was some quality about him I could not catch. It was as though his manner was a mask, behind which his real self remained hidden. Only his eyes

looked out through the mask. And it seemed to me that they were the eyes of a man in torment.

I looked from him to his wife and was struck by the contrast between them. Her dark, nervous intelligence, her reckless defiance, rose in one's face like a cold wind. What was it that had thrown her into the arms of this correct, conventional fellow?

I was extremely interested. It was a combination from which fireworks might be expected. Nor was I disappointed. Helen Clapp turned cool, scornful eyes on her husband.

"You can do as you like," she said.

He stared at her and I grew suddenly dizzy at sight of the abyss that yawned between those two. It was not hatred, apparently, but a vast, cold, bitter estrangement.

"I will answer your question," said Henry Clapp. "Yes. Philip Radnor knew about the sitting. He and Mrs. Clapp and I had dinner at Lucy Shanks' apartment one night last week—Friday, I believe—and Helen's work was discussed. Miss Shanks had seen the bust and thought it good."

"Was an appointment made for to-day?"

Mr. Clapp nodded.

"Yes. Helen said that she thought one more sitting would about do it, and Jenkins said he'd come this morning."

"Was any definite time set for the appointment?"

"Yes. Ten o'clock, I believe."

I was watching Helen Clapp. Her eyes were fixed on her husband with a profound and penetrating scorn.

"Now please think carefully, Mrs. Clapp. Did any one else know that Boyd Jenkins was to be here this morning?"

"I should think any one of twenty people—perhaps more—might know of it. At the Haviland Street Club

Saturday night—before Philip Radnor came in—Mr. Jenkins told a group of people about it. He seemed quite set up about having the bust done. Any one in the room might have heard him. And I remember distinctly that he turned to me and said that, by the way, he'd be late on Tuesday, and would ten-thirty do."

Her indignant eyes turned for an instant to her husband.

"Any one at the Club Saturday night could have known," she repeated, almost defiantly, I thought.

To my surprise Peel made no further effort to question Henry Clapp. He said politely that no doubt Philip Radnor would be able to account for his whereabouts at the time the murder was committed. Then he looked at Bullitt.

"Aiken and I will move along now," he said. "Thanks, Mrs. Clapp."

Henry Clapp intervened.

"About my mother's hairdresser, Miss Wren——"

Peel glanced through the window at the falling snow.

"It's vile weather to get about on foot. We'll drop her wherever she's going. I don't believe Bullitt will need her any more—at the moment."

He glanced at the sergeant, who opened his mouth to protest, evidently thought better of it, and nodded.

"O.K. with me, Inspector."

On the second floor we encountered a maid—the same one I had seen before.

"Can you help us a moment?" said Peel. "I just want to get the lay of the land, so to speak—the arrangement of the rooms."

"Yes, sir." She seemed perfectly composed. A little pert, a little excited, perhaps.

"Mr. Henry Clapp and his wife live upstairs, I understand."

"No, sir. They used to. But a few months ago Mr. Clapp moved down into the room that used to be his father's, on this floor."

"Ah, indeed! How many rooms are there on the floor above?"

"Three, sir—same as this floor. The big studio in front and two rooms in back: Young Mrs. Clapp's bedroom and a room they use for a private sitting-room."

"So there is no room left for Mr. Henry Clapp," said Peel thoughtfully.

"Yes, sir. So he moved down next to his mother. Shall I show you?"

"No," said Peel, "thank you. It won't be necessary."

And he went on thoughtfully down the stairs.

CHAPTER VIII

Tuesday, December 12. 3.30 p.m.

IN the drawing-room a little group had gathered: Commissioner Mottram, looking very uncomfortable, and George Sutter, immaculate as always and unperturbed, although I fancied his poise was on this occasion a little strained. Old Mrs. Clapp alone looked as though nothing unusual had happened. I fancied it would take more than a murder to upset her superb aplomb.

Mottram seemed considerably relieved at Peel's appearance. He took advantage of our entrance to make his escape.

"Bullitt upstairs?" he said. "I'll just go up."

"I hope," said the old lady crisply, "you'll see your way clear to getting the police out of my house at the earliest possible moment."

"At the earliest possible moment," agreed Mottram, and he disappeared up the stairs.

"That man dislikes me," said Mrs. Clapp suddenly, with alarming distinctness. "I wonder why."

George Sutter broke in hastily:

"Would it be indiscreet to ask, Inspector, if you have learned anything——"

I looked at him curiously: his good-looking, smooth countenance, assured and vigorous with health; his well-set-up, well-groomed appearance. It was hard to believe he was the brother of the old lady in black satin. He looked much more like a brother of the man upstairs, whom, in fact, he greatly resembled. A younger brother, I added mentally, remembering Henry Clapp's tormented eyes.

"If you'll excuse me, Mrs. Clapp," said Peel, "I'd like to talk to Mr. Sutter——"

"Certainly," said Sutter. "We'll go into the library."

We left the old lady sitting among her gilt chairs and ormolu and rose brocade. Her eyes, now haggard and tragic, followed us sombrely.

In the library Sutter sank down into a deep chair with a sigh of relief. His face showed anxious lines now, away from his sister's scrutiny.

"Good God!" he muttered, and stared into the fire. After a moment he added: "This is going to raise a stink, Inspector."

"I should think it likely," agreed Peel.

He lit a cigarette, and leaned forward.

"I understand," he said, "that you had some sort of interview with Jenkins at the club last Saturday."

Sutter glanced at me and back at the fire.

"I rather expected you'd ask me about that," he said. "Yes. I did have an—interview."

"Suppose you tell me about it, if you will."

"Of course." Sutter snapped the ash from his cigar-

ette and leaned back. "It was all very simple, really, although"—with another glance at me—"I dare say it looked melodramatic enough to an outsider.

"Jenkins called me up at the bank just before twelve. He said he wanted to see me and would expect me at his rooms in half an hour. He took the most extraordinary tone with me and I got pretty annoyed. After all, I know him only slightly and here he was, ordering me about. So I was a bit short with him. I told him it would be impossible for me to do as he asked because I had an engagement to lunch at the club. He said that I'd better think it over. It would be my hard luck if I didn't go—or words to that effect."

"And you said?"

"I told him to go to hell."

I thought it likely that he had followed this advice, but I did not say so.

"When I got ready," Sutter went on, "I went round to the club, and, as Aiken has no doubt told you, Jenkins put in an appearance about two. He behaved in what I can only call an extraordinary manner. I thought at first he'd been drinking, but apparently he hadn't. Anyway, he demanded to see me privately, and rather than make a scene, I went into the lounge with him. He shut the door after us.

"I didn't know what to make of the business and I was pretty angry. I asked him what the hell he meant by it.

"He said he'd heard there was talk of putting him out of the club and he just wanted me to know that if that was done, there'd be such a stink that the club would go up in pieces and never be seen again. He said he'd collected enough stuff on the members to make them yell for help if he once got going.

"Well, naturally, I told him I didn't believe it, and

of course I don't. I think myself the fellow was a bit cracked—had delusions—that sort of thing."

"Just a moment," said Peel. "Did he mention anything specific—name any definite person?"

"Not at all. Just a sort of blanket indictment."

"He didn't—you'll realise I have to ask this—he didn't suggest, for instance, that he had anything against you?"

Sutter flushed faintly.

"No. Nothing of the sort."

Peel put the fingertips of his two hands together and studied them thoughtfully.

"Then why," he asked, "did he pick you as the recipient of his grievances? I understand it was Thompson who put him up for membership."

"I asked him the same question," said Sutter with every appearance of candour. "He said he intended to see Thompson, too."

"Yet he seems to have made no effort to do so."

"You'll have to ask Thompson about that," said Sutter stiffly. "I understand Jenkins called him at the club."

"I suppose—a mere formality of course—you can tell us where you were, say between twelve-thirty and one o'clock to-day?"

For the first time Sutter seemed definitely uneasy.

"I don't know that I can," he stated at last. "I can tell you where I was, of course, but I doubt if I can prove it. I suppose that is what you meant."

"That," said Peel dryly, "is what I meant."

"Yes. Well, it happens that to-morrow is my sister's—Mrs. Clapp's birthday. I realised this morning that I'd forgotten to get her a present, so at twelve o'clock I went down to O'Dunn's. I couldn't find what I had in mind—I wanted a copy of that new book of Hemingway—so I wandered round the store for a while."

"Do you remember which departments?"

Sutter frowned thoughtfully.

"I looked at handbags, I believe, and I know I walked through the china department. And I considered lingerie, but I'm always afraid to buy that sort of thing without expert assistance. Finally I decided on a box of gloves. I bought them——"

"Could you identify the sales clerk?"

"I have the package at the bank. The sales check will be in it."

"Good. When did you make your purchase?"

"I don't know exactly, of course, but I should say about a quarter of one. When I had done so, I went up to the restaurant and had a hasty lunch. By that time it was half-past one and, as I had a business appointment at two, I hurried back to the bank."

"Thanks very much. I'll send some one along for that sales check later."

He got to his feet.

"And you've nothing further to tell us about your interview with Jenkins?"

"There is nothing more to tell."

"Mr. Sutter," said Peel, "I can only give you good advice. I can't force you to take it. You'd be wiser to be frank with me."

"I've nothing further to say," said George Sutter stubbornly.

As we emerged from the front door with Matilda Wren in tow, we encountered a little group of newspaper men arguing with a policeman. On seeing Peel, they abandoned the policeman and surrounded us hopefully. Only Marcus White of the *Starpaper* leaned against the brass-topped post of the stair rail and took no part in the proceedings. His hat pulled down over his eyes and his coat collar turned up, he stared mournfully at the Monument while his teeth chattered audibly.

"Why not? Why not?" Peel was saying to an irritated staff photographer. "They're through in there now, I think. No, nothing yet—that's up to Bullitt anyway. He'll be down in a minute."

He put Miss Wren into the back of his car and the reporters tramped off after the policeman. Marcus White came into action slowly. He strolled across the pavement and put one foot on the running-board. He spoke sideways to Peel so that Miss Wren could not hear him.

"Look here," he said, "Henry Clapp's secretary never did find him, you know."

"No?" said Peel politely.

"I could tell you where he spent the time from twelve to two."

"Where?"

"Looking at the pretty pictures in Walters' gallery."

"The hell you say."

"I didn't say it: the gallery attendant did."

"How did you find it out?"

"Saw him coming out. I was on my way over here, so I told him what was up and he came round with me. He expressed all the proper sentiments—almost too many of 'em, since you press me for my opinion. So I dropped him here and rode right around the square back to the Walters' and made a few discreet inquiries. And the attendant said he'd been there for two hours anyway and had been a good boy and hadn't broken anything—not even the glass case over the 'Star Spangled Banner.'"

"There's a back door into the lane from that place," said Peel softly.

"Bright boy! I thought of it myself."

"But it's kept locked."

"Doors that are locked can be unlocked," said White sententiously.

"Bet it's locked now, anyway."

"Let's go look," suggested Marcus White.

"Got your car?"

"Round the corner."

"Right. You can drive me downtown afterwards. Jonas can take my car."

"What do I do with the lady?" I inquired with acid politeness.

"Make love to her—pump her—get her to pour her maiden confidences into your ear."

Marcus White cast a casual eye through the car window.

"Why not murder her and bury her under the snow?" he suggested lugubriously as he moved away. I was pretty thoroughly irritated as I watched them disappear round the corner into Cathedral Street. Miss Wren leaned forward and rapped on the glass.

"Well?" she said. "What's the matter now?"

I made some heated remarks under my breath, opened the front door and slid under the wheel.

"Where do you want to go?" I asked her.

It was only afterwards that we realised what a mistake had been made, and how seriously we had underestimated the importance of Matilda Wren in the scheme of things.

CHAPTER IX

Tuesday, December 12. 4 p.m.

WHEN I had left Matilda Wren at a tea-room, I drove down to Clancy's, parked Peel's car and left the key with Clancy. It was four o'clock by that time, almost dark, and the raw cold had become a thing of sharp steel, cutting at the ribs when you breathed. I dreaded going home to my empty, silent house. I came within an ace of calling up Violet and asking her to come home, but pride forbade. So I stood for half an hour at the bar, chatting with Clancy and an odd acquaintance or two who dropped in, and sipped a cocktail.

The papers with the story of the murder, were, of course, already on the street and every one was talking about the crime. They all seemed to take it for granted that it was only a question of time before Philip Radnor would be arrested. Which deepened my gloom, for I was just beginning to realise how strong the case against him was.

It was five o'clock when I got home. Moose heard me putting my key in the lock and came out of the dining-room.

"Miss Shanks is here, suh," he told me. "She seemed considerable upset, suh, so I put her in your work-room and took her the sherry."

"Quite right."

I straightened my tie before the hall mirror and went upstairs. In a way, I ought to have expected her. But even then I did not quite expect the figure of tragedy that confronted me.

She was cowering in abject misery in a deep chair by the fire, and her eyes, turned toward the door on my entrance, were puffed with weeping.

"My dear!" I said to her. I hurried across the room and put my hand on her shoulder. "My dear! Surely not as bad as that!"

"It couldn't be worse, Jonas. Philip has disappeared."

I sat down beside her and held her hand. If she was right, she didn't exaggerate the seriousness.

"Tell me what happened."

She tried pitifully to pull herself together.

"A policeman came to the store about four o'clock—Sergeant Bullitt, I think he said his name was."

I winced. I could picture what Lucy had felt.

"Yes?"

"He told me about—about it. It was the first I'd heard. He asked if I knew where Philip was. I told him at his office, I supposed. And he said they'd been there—and to his apartment, and he wasn't there. That he had left his office at twelve-fifteen, telling his secretary he'd be back at two, and hasn't been seen since."

I confess I was shaken. It dovetailed all too neatly. Jenkins leaving Mrs. Clapp at twelve-thirty to keep an appointment, and Radnor leaving his office a few blocks away at twelve-fifteen to do what? I had a sudden horrible picture of those two meeting in a high, dark room with a big stained-glass window at the end, quarrelling, perhaps—

"But—disappeared?" I said weakly. "Surely that's a strong word. There must be dozens of places he could be. When he learns what's happened and that the police want to question him——"

"The papers have been on the streets for hours," said Lucy miserably.

"Well, after all, one doesn't buy a paper every half-hour. You didn't know yourself until Bullitt told you."

"Jonas"—her stiff lips had difficulty with the words—"will they arrest him?"

I got up under pretence of getting a cigarette. I sought for some way to soften the words, but there's no way to soften a thing like that.

"I don't know, my dear. It will depend, I should think, on what account he can give of himself."

"When was the murder committed?"

"Jenkins left Mrs. Clapp's studio at twelve-thirty."

"Left Mrs. Clapp's studio?" said Lucy quickly.

"He was sitting for a bust she is doing of him. Didn't you know?"

"Yes—yes—of course. But I didn't connect it with the murder."

"Do you think it has a connection?" I asked curiously.

"Well, it could, couldn't it?"

I lit my cigarette and stared at the fire. I was seeing Helen Clapp's dark, intelligent face. I heard her saying proudly: "I can take care of myself." And Henry Clapp, who had spent two hours in the Walters Gallery in the next street.

"Yes," I said, "it undoubtedly could."

"So what?" said Lucy.

"At one o'clock or a few minutes past, Jenkins was found dead in the vestibule of the Clapp house. So that makes half an hour to account for. But I'd better tell you all about it."

So I told her, and she listened, her face frozen and white, her eyes burning.

"So that's that," she said when I had finished. "Do you think he did it, Jonas?"

I opened my mouth to say quickly: "Of course not," but I didn't say it. I knew that what she wanted was not comfort but an honest answer. Lucy and I have known each other for a long time. What I said at last was:

"I don't think he did. But one can't blink the fact

that there's a strong case against him. He knew that Boyd Jenkins was to be at Mrs. Clapp's this morning. He may have known when he was going to leave. At any rate he left his club in time to intercept Jenkins. He was in the habit of going to Mrs. Clapp's through the empty house next door. Then there's that scene at the Haviland Street Club."

"But motive, Jonas! That squib in the paper about me might possibly be a motive for knocking a man down, but murder—it's preposterous!"

"I agree with you," I said. "But I wouldn't count too heavily on that weakness. After all, he's the obvious suspect, and the police do love the obvious explanation." I did not add: "Because it is so often the true one," but I thought it. I looked at her uneasily and looked away. I could not bear the suffering in her eyes.

"Don't take it so hard, Lucy," I said. I could think of nothing better to say. "After all, he may have an ironclad alibi."

"Jonas," she said, and her voice was quite steady and her face suddenly quiet, "I want to say something to you, and I want you to believe me. You've always believed me."

"Yes, my dear."

"Philip did not do this thing. I know it. There are things one knows about people. No matter what is behind all this silly mystery—and whether he has an alibi or not—he didn't do it. I stake my life on it—because"—and suddenly her lips trembled beyond her control—"because if I am wrong—my life will be over."

"As bad as that, my dear?"

She smiled wryly through falling tears.

"As bad as that?"

And then she blew her nose and laughed shakily.

Accustomed as I am to feminine vagaries, I was startled. I was also relieved.

"How about a cocktail?" I suggested hastily. "Sherry is vile stuff, I always think, although Peel makes quite a pose of liking it."

"Will I ruin your reputation if I stay for a bit?" she asked. "I've left word everywhere I could think of that I'd be here—in case Phil tried to reach me."

"In that case my reputation is already ruined and you might as well stay."

"Then give me a cocktail, for heaven's sake. And put some more wood on the fire. It's frigid in here."

It wasn't. It was too hot, if anything. But I obeyed her, for I could see she was shivering.

Philip Radnor came at about half-past six. I had not placed much credence in the disappearance theory, but, nevertheless, when I actually heard his voice in the hall below I was enormously relieved. There is nothing the prosecution loves so much as an unexplained absence just after a crime.

Lucy had by this time entirely pulled herself together. I think she had adopted the point of view that, since she herself knew he was innocent, it would be a simple matter to convert every one else, the police included, to the same point of view. At any rate, she went out to the head of the stairs to meet him with a composed, even buoyant air. I let her go. I hope I still have sense enough to know when my room is preferable to my company. I would have left the room, but there was no way out except through the hall. So I stayed where I was. It was some time before they joined me.

It is often hard for us to understand the passions of our friends, but I do not find it difficult to sympathise with Lucy's devotion to Philip Radnor. He's a decent sort—a very decent sort indeed. And pleasant to look

at without being offensively handsome. He was, moreover, cut his eye-teeth and learned his way around; which, come to think of it, made his conduct of the last few days all the more extraordinary.

However, if he had, temporarily, lost his head, he had certainly found it again. His bearing, as he came in with his arm around Lucy, left nothing to be desired. As I caught his look, cool, confident, candid, I was as certain that I was looking at an innocent man as though he had just presented me with an ironclad, unshakable alibi. Which, as it turned out, was just what he could not do.

"The devil's in it, Mr. Aiken," he said ruefully, bending forward to shake the ash from his cigarette into the fire. "Any day for the past three months I could have proved exactly where I was and what I was doing between twelve-thirty and one."

"And you can't to-day?" My heart sank. I looked at Lucy. There was a curious expression in her eyes. She had the look of a girl who holds herself still, without breathing, in a rocking boat. Terror—that was what it was. I repeated my question stupidly.

"How does it happen that you can't prove your whereabouts to-day?"

"Because of a very curious thing—which nobody will believe."

He did not look at Lucy. He reached out and took her hand and held it.

"I had a phone call from Boyd Jenkins about ten o'clock this morning. He said he wanted to see me about something very important and could I meet him somewhere at twelve-thirty. I said I'd see him at my office, but he said no; how about my apartment? I agreed finally and then he asked if my man would be there. Said it was a very private matter. I told him my man went off as soon as he'd finished his work and

only came back to get dinner. He said all right, then, and he'd meet me at twelve-thirty, or as close to it as he could manage. And he begged me to wait for him, if he should be delayed. Said the thing was very important. He sounded a good deal upset."

"Sure it was Boyd Jenkins talking?"

He gave a quick, questioning glance.

"I didn't doubt it at the time," he said, "although, if there seems to be any reason to question it, I wouldn't be too sure. He spoke very low, as if he was afraid of being overheard—and, as I say, he seemed upset, and that changes a voice. No, I couldn't swear to it, although I certainly believed at the time that it was Jenkins."

"What happened then?"

"Well, I went home—left the office about twelve-fifteen and got home just before half-past. And I waited till two. Of course he didn't come. I was pretty sore, so I finally called his office and the place where he lives, but they didn't know where he was. At two o'clock I left a note saying I'd be back, and went round the corner to Alexi's and got some lunch. Then I went back. The note was still there. I decided it wasn't worth while to wait any longer, so I left."

"Have you got the note?"

He shook his head.

"Tore it up."

"Where'd you put the pieces?"

"I don't know—in the waste basket, I suppose."

"Why?"

"Nothing much. Where'd you go then?"

"Drove around."

"In the snow?"

"I was upset. He was a poisonous little rat. I didn't know what he was up to. I tried to find him—went to several places where he's said to hang out: Morley's,

that Italian place on Reade Street, the Georgian Village. I can make a list of 'em, and no doubt somebody'll remember I was there, but of course that was a long time after the murder."

"Did you ask for Jenkins?"

"No, just hung around a bit, and when he didn't come I sheered off and tried another place. Finally I remembered I'd said I'd be back at the office at two. I called up, and my secretary told me what had happened. That the police were looking for me and that Lucy had left word she'd be here. I suppose I should have gone direct to the police—but I had to see Lucy first—so I came here."

He looked at her then, and for a moment his mask slipped. I looked away, but not before I had seen the stark anguish that looked out of his eyes. But he had himself in hand again in a moment.

"I must go now," he said.

I got up without apology and walked out of the room, and in the hall outside I mopped my forehead with my handkerchief.

Five minutes later Lucy called to me.

"I'm going with him, Jonas," she said.

Philip Radnor wrung my hand. They started downstairs, but half-way down he left her and came back.

"Look here," he said in a low voice, "I'm not kidding myself. I'm in about as tight a place as they make. I didn't kill Jenkins, but I won't be able to prove it. They'll hold me all right. Ten to one they'll indict me—if they can prove a motive. Look after Lucy, will you?"

"I will," I said. It was all I could find to say.

"Thanks." He wrung my hand again, hesitated a moment as if he were going to say something else, changed his mind, and ran down the stairs. A moment later the door closed behind them and I could hear the

purr of his car in the street and then silence, ominous, foreboding. I went to the window and looked out. The snow fell heavily, relentlessly. The lighted windows across the street were a half-seen blur. I drew the curtains sharply and went back to the fire.

CHAPTER X

Tuesday, December 12. 9 p.m.

It was nine o'clock when Peel came in. I had spent two mortal hours alone with my thoughts and they had not been pleasant. Moose had come up twice from the kitchen to inquire if I would dine. But I was in no mood for a solitary dinner and I put him off. When at last I heard Peel's characteristic double ring, I heaved a sigh of relief.

He came in stamping, and shaking the snow from his collar.

"What weather you have in these parts," he said to Moose. "You should do something about it."

"Yassuh, ain't it de truf, suh," said Moose with the liquid chuckle I can never earn from him with my most laboured witticisms.

Peel came upstairs.

"Gad, what a spoiled fellow you are, Jones," he said presently, when Moose, having presented us with a perfect cocktail—and replenished the fire, had vanished silently.

I allowed this remark to pass unchallenged.

"Radnor's been here," I told him.

He nodded.

"Bullitt sent me word he'd turned up. What was he doing here?"

I told him. Peel stared thoughtfully into the fire.

"That telephone call—could he swear it was Jenkins' voice?"

"I asked him the same question. He said he assumed it was, but that the fellow spoke so low and with so much agitation——"

For a moment Peel said nothing. Then he stirred uneasily.

"This is a curious case, Jonas," he said. "I feel it in my bones it's going to be one of those damn things that don't make sense."

He lit a cigarette and threw the match into the fire.

"If we accept this statement of Radnor's—and it's silly enough to be true—then we've got to assume a very carefully planned and premeditated murder, with a suspect selected beforehand and deliberately decoyed into a position where he cannot prove an alibi. That inquiry about Radnor's servant is suggestive. If he had said the servant would be there, no doubt another rendezvous would have been selected.

"This theory implies that the murderer knew within a short time the moment when he was going to commit the crime. Which again means that he knew when Jenkins, on his way from Mrs. Clapp's studio, would pass through the vacant house.

"Mrs. Clapp said that Jenkins told her he had an appointment at quarter to one. Therefore the murderer must have known of this appointment—perhaps had made it with Jenkins himself."

"About this telephone call to Radnor," I interrupted. "Couldn't that really have been a call from Jenkins? Some one might have overheard it, and been afraid Jenkins was going to—well, perhaps give something away to Radnor—and shot him to prevent it."

Peel laughed.

"My dear Jonas! Ingenious as always!"

"You needn't laugh," I said huffily. "It's no more ingenious than your idea."

"There's just one discrepancy," he said mildly. "Radnor says his appointment with Jenkins was for twelve-thirty and Jenkins told Mrs. Clapp his appointment was for quarter to one. No, no, my dear fellow. Either Radnor is lying and has made the story up out of whole cloth——"

"I'd take my oath it's true," I said a little heatedly.

"Well, well, I don't say it isn't. In fact, I'm inclined to agree with you. In which case we fall back on my original suggestion. The murderer knew when and where he could get at Jenkins. So he picked the likeliest suspect—fortunately for him, Radnor had actually, in the presence of a lot of people, threatened to shoot Jenkins—and arranged to throw the blame for the murder on him. It's beautifully simple, when you think of it."

"I thought you said it didn't make sense."

He ran a harassed hand over his forehead.

"Does it seem likely to you, Jonas, that Henry Clapp is sufficiently interested in art to spend two hours in the middle of a winter Tuesday in the Walters' Art Gallery?"

"Is there a back door on the lane?" I asked.

He nodded.

"It's locked, of course. And it's protected with a burglar alarm at the head of the stairs. Ordinarily it takes two men to open it: one to turn off the alarm and the other to unlock the door. But if you knew where the alarm was, and had a key——"

"You know," he added casually, "Henry Clapp is a director of the Walters."

I nodded. I was beginning to understand.

"People connected with the gallery use that door on

days when the place is closed to the public, or after hours. Some of 'em have keys.

"I quizzed the attendants a bit about Clapp. But I couldn't get anything very definite. They knew him well, of course. They didn't pay much attention. He talked a bit when he first went in and when he left, but they don't seem to know where he was in between."

"That lane's lined with garages, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"Any one could go along it—in a storm like to-day particularly—and not be seen. If he had a key, he could go into the empty garage of the Sutter house, along a covered passage, and into the back hall. Matter of fact, some one did just that. The cobwebs over the door had been torn and the dust disturbed."

"Good God!" I murmured. I was seeing a very vivid picture of Henry Clapp's handsome, tormented face.

"But it doesn't fit, Jonas!" exclaimed Peel with exasperation. "The two halves don't go together. The first part—involving Radnor, the telephone call—that's smart as hell. A bit obvious perhaps, but the sort of hoax it would be devilish hard to prove anything about one way or another. But the second part—showing himself openly in the gallery——"

"An alibi?" I suggested.

"Certainly," said Peel irritably. "What in hell would it be if it weren't an alibi? But it's such a damn poor one. I know as well as if I'd seen him do it that Henry Clapp went along that lane and into that back hall. But what he did when he got there——"

"Why an alibi if he didn't plan to shoot Jenkins?"

Peel ignored me.

"What did he want? What did he see? What was he up to? And why was he so anxious no one should

know about it? If his presence had nothing to do with the murder, why didn't he give the alarm?"

"There's a motive," I suggested.

"Yes," said Peel. "If he had reason to think Helen Clapp was having an affair with this Jenkins bird—I think, Jonas, we'll have to find out at whose instance Henry Clapp moved downstairs to his father's room."

Peel sipped his drink thoughtfully.

"What did you think of Helen Clapp?" he asked.

"A very interesting woman," I said.

Peel grinned at me.

"What it is to have the gift of words!" he said.

"How exactly right!"

I stared at him.

"I'm very much interested in Helen Clapp," he said thoughtfully.

"Do you think Mrs. Clapp shot Jenkins?" I asked with astonishment.

"It's conceivable," he said slowly, "if Jenkins were blackmailing her. I wish I knew what was behind that letter. Has it occurred to you what an extraordinary thing it was for old Mrs. Clapp to do—handing that letter to Mottram? I'd like to know why she did it."

"Yes," I admitted. "It was certainly queer."

"And then we mustn't forget Mr. George Sutter. It's a pity, Jonas, you didn't listen in on his conversation with Jenkins."

"No doubt," I said dryly.

"And Mr. Winslow Thompson, who was pestered with letters and phone calls. It seems evident, in fact, that a lot of people might be interested in getting rid of Boyd Jenkins. He appears to have annoyed a good many in his time."

"I should think it likely," I agreed. "Then you think——"

But Peel shook his head.

"It's too soon to think, Jonas. Facts are what we want and we have so few. There's so much we don't know. Just, for instance, why was the revolver planted in Matilda Wren's bag? I can't think, can you? And what was it that Jenkins knew about Philip Radnor?" He smiled suddenly and tossed off the last of his drink. "How about food, Jonas?"

As though in answer to the question, Moose appeared in the doorway, announcing dinner.

We had dealt with an excellent Brie and were drinking our coffee when Bullitt arrived. He looked a little harassed, I thought, as though he were suffering from an unusual division of the mind.

"Dinner, Sergeant?" I suggested, but he said he had already dined.

"I'll have some coffee," he said, "if you'll let me have a decent-sized cup. Never could manage those dinky little things." But Moose, who knew and remembered all the peculiarities of our guests, had already produced the biggest cup in the house and was filling it with steaming coffee.

I waited with some anxiety for what Bullitt had to say.

"You've seen Radnor?" I asked at last, unable to wait any longer.

He nodded heavily.

"Yup. The gun's his, all right."

My heart sank.

"He says it was stolen. His story is he kept it in a drawer of a table beside his bed and that he hadn't looked at it for three months. Some time in the fall he took it out and cleaned it and put it back. Hadn't opened the drawer since."

Peel grinned.

"I suppose you won't agree with me, Sergeant, that that lets him out?"

"Oh, sure!" said Bullitt with sarcasm. "Jenkins was shot with Radnor's gun, so of course Radnor's innocent. Sure!"

"All right; you tell me why he didn't take the gun with him, instead of leaving it in Matilda Wren's bag."

"I can't," said Bullitt. "I ain't a mind reader. And now I'm going to give you a surprise, Inspector. I don't think Radnor's guilty."

Peel looked at him shrewdly.

"No? Why?"

"Well, I tell you. You think we're pretty dumb, Mr. Peel. Oh, you're too polite to say so, but you do. But when you've been handling murder cases for twenty years, you get a feel about 'em. You can tell guilt when you see it—nine times out of ten. It's like a cabinetmaker can tell wood or"—he glanced at me—"or an editor can tell a good story. You told me once about a feller that claimed he could tell whether a manuscript was any good by the way the package was tied up. Well, he may have been a liar—I don't know. But I can tell whether a man's telling a straight story or not—nine times out of ten. Women are harder because they've had more practice—lying. I'd say seven out of ten, there."

"You put me to shame, Sergeant," murmured Peel.

"No, I don't. We know each other, Mr. Peel. Of course, I won't say Radnor's out of this case. I've got a couple of men working on him. If I could turn up a motive—a good one—— But I've checked his story—as far as it can be checked. Nobody heard him talking over the telephone, but the phone girl in the office says he got a call about that time, all right. We found the scraps of that note he says he left at the apartment for Jenkins. It was torn up and thrown in the waste basket like he said. Of course that might have been a plant.

"And he went where he said he did in the afternoon. A lot of people remembered seeing him."

Bullitt drained his coffee cup.

"Of course I may be a fool," he said with more confidence, "but I'm damned if I don't think he's telling the truth. How about it, Mr. Peel?"

Peel poured himself a liqueur and sat turning it in his glass.

"Not all the truth, Sergeant," he said softly. "Not all the truth."

The sergeant grunted.

"That's true enough. But he ain't the type. Course you could figure that he done it, and make a good case. But it don't smell right to me. I got other ideas."

"Bright boy!" said Peel. "So have I."

Bullitt winked at me.

"He's so smart it hurts," he said amiably. "Did you check that tip about Clapp being in the Walters' Gallery?"

"Yes," said Peel, and he repeated what he had told me.

Bullitt nodded.

"We found those torn cobwebs in the back hall," he said. "Couldn't make anything of the footprints, though, too blurred. And no fingerprints."

"He'd have gloves."

"But we found something else—on the stairs," Bullitt went on, and now there was unmistakable triumph in his face. "Evidently caught between the newel post and the rail when he leaned over to look down, and jerked off when he started downstairs."

He took an envelope from his pocket and spilled from it on to the tablecloth a thin gold penknife, shaped like a fish, with a broken link of gold chain attached to it.

"It's Clapp's, all right. The butler identified it. And

he's ready to swear he saw Clapp use it at breakfast to slit open his mail."

Peel's eyes gleamed as he leaned over the find.

"When Clapp came into the studio, after the murder, his watch chain was hanging loose and I noticed the final link was missing. I don't suppose he even knew he'd lost the knife. Where did you find it?"

"On the outside edge of a stairtread, half-way up the first flight. But he must have been standing in the second floor hall. There's a definite fresh scratch in the wood by the newel post. It must have snapped off with considerable force, and fallen to the place we found it."

"And what," said Peel softly, "made him move so violently, and why didn't he know he'd snapped the chain? After all, it would take quite a jerk to do a thing like that."

"Because he heard Jenkins coming down and wanted to be in hiding downstairs before he appeared."

Peel got up and wandered restlessly around the room.

"What's your theory?" he asked.

Bullitt put the knife back in its envelope and returned it to his pocket.

"Just what yours is," he said with a grin. "Clapp found out his wife was carrying on with this Jenkins fellow and he wouldn't stand for it."

"After all," objected Peel, "there are divorce courts—as no one should know better than Henry Clapp."

"Honour of the old family name," suggested Bullitt.

"Oh, hell, if murderers acted sensibly there wouldn't be any murders."

Peel looked doubtful.

"Well," he said, "so what?"

"So Clapp knows Jenkins is going to be at the studio this morning. Maybe he makes that phone call to Radnor and maybe he don't, but anyway he goes to the Walters and makes sure they know he's there. Then

he slips along the lane and in the back door of the empty house. Easy enough for him to have the keys. He goes upstairs and makes sure Jenkins is there—maybe listens at the door. Then he slips down to the second floor and waits."

"Why the second floor, Sergeant? After all, Jenkins would have to go all the way down, and if he was going to kill him on the first floor, why didn't he wait there?"

"How the hell should I know? Maybe he wanted to eavesdrop to make sure he was right."

"But he couldn't eavesdrop from the second floor. The studio's on the third, you know."

Bullitt began to look apoplectic.

"What difference does it make why he stopped on the second floor? He may have stopped on his way down to listen and make sure there was nobody else downstairs."

"Then why did he start away so violently that he broke his watch chain and didn't know it?"

"He may have known it, for all I can tell."

"No, he didn't know it." There was a glow in Peel's eyes now—a glow I recognised. "Good Lord, Sergeant, if he'd known it, would he have gone around with his watch chain hanging loose and the corpse of his victim lying in the house where he'd dropped the knife? Would he have gone round wearing the chain at all? He may be crazy, but not crazy enough for that. No, he didn't know. Something startled him so he didn't know. Find out what it was and you'll have the answer."

"I've got the answer," said the sergeant, and a tone of sullen doggedness had crept into his voice. "Clapp shot Jenkins—take my word for it. Then he beat it back the way he came. With any luck, the body wouldn't have been found for hours, and he would have taken care that some one knew where he was all

that time. But Jenkins wasn't dead—not quite. He came to enough to try to get help. Apparently he didn't know about that door into the Clapps' back hall. But he managed to stagger out of the house. There's no one in sight on account it's such a rotten day, so he climbs up Mrs. Clapp's front steps, meaning to ring the bell. Now the bell on that house ain't outside—it's in the vestibule and the door's heavy. Way, I figure it, getting that door open just about tore it. He never got to the bell. Just fell down in the vestibule and died."

"I won't fight you about that," said Peel.

"Then what do we quarrel about?"

"You fit the revolver into that story and maybe I'll believe it—some of it, anyway."

"I'll know more about the revolver when we've traced it."

"You won't trace it," said Peel. "You'll find there've been fifty people in Radnor's apartment in the last three months."

"And Henry Clapp was one of them."

"All right. Suppose he was. That won't tell you why in hell Clapp carried the gun into his own back hall and put it in Matilda Wren's black bag."

"If he was trying to throw the blame on Radnor, he might have——" But clearly his own logic defeated him. He fell silent.

Peel nodded.

"Figure on it," he said grimly. "I've been at it for hours and haven't seen the light yet. There isn't a single intelligible reason why whoever shot Jenkins shouldn't either take the gun with him or leave it beside the body. If it was his own gun or could be traced to him, he'd have taken it and disposed of it outside. If it wasn't, and he didn't care who found it, he'd have left it by the body. Again, if he's trying to throw sus-

picion on Radnor, he'd have left it by the body. There's no reason you can figure why he'd have taken the incredible risk of going into the hall next door to hide it. Unless——" Peel's face suddenly changed. A light broke in it. "Unless—— By Jove!"

"What?" asked Bullitt blankly.

"Of course, it's so obvious there was a third person present at this little party: Jenkins and Clapp—and some one else."

"By God!" cried Bullitt excitedly. "You mean Helen Clapp."

Peel grinned at him.

"Perhaps."

"Helen Clapp!" muttered Bullitt. "Why not? She had the opportunity."

"Motive?"

"Jenkins may have been blackmailing her."

"Getting a bit mixed on your motives, aren't you? How does Henry fit in on that—and the murder planned ahead of time—alibi, weapon, all complete?"

"I'll just find out," Bullitt said grimly. "I've got a few questions I want to ask him."

Peel opened his mouth to say something, but changed his mind. Bullitt laughed.

"You're a great one, Inspector, and no mistake, but you've got too much imagination. This case is open and shut."

"That's what I say," said Peel.

When Bullitt finally took his departure, well fortified against the inclement weather, silence settled down on the house—a silence in which one became aware of the soft rustle of the falling, sleet-like snow outside. Somewhere nearby a taxi ground to a stop and then the front door opened and, blown on a flurry of wind and snow, some one came in and banged the door shut. We

both looked up. There was a light step in the hall, and a moment later a slender little figure in a gray squirrel coat, her red hair starred with snow, stood smiling at us.

"Hello, you fellers!" said Violet.

Somehow the distorted world settled back into its proper perspective and things upside down turned rightside up again. My sense of nightmare vanished.

"Hello!" I said. "This is nice!"

She shed her coat on the nearest chair, flung her hat down on it, and ran her fingers through her lovely hair.

"Why do I ever go away?" she asked, and, giving Peel's shoulder a friendly pat, she drew up her chair beside me and openly held my hand.

"My God," said Violet piously, "what an awful world this would be if I hadn't this to come back to."

She helped herself to my brandy and settled her elbow on the table.

"I've been reading newspapers all the way over on the bus and in the taxi. For heaven's sake, tell me what it's all about."

And Peel, moving round so that he could hold her other hand, told her.

When he had finished Violet came to the point with the disconcerting directness that is so characteristic of her.

"But who wrote the letters?"

"Damned if I know." Peel spread them out on the table. "This one to Mrs. Clapp must have been written by some one in the house."

Violet read it thoughtfully.

SOMETHING IS GOING ON IN YOUR HOUSE
THAT YOU KNOW NOTHING ABOUT. YOU
MUST ACT IF YOU WANT TO AVOID A
SCANDAL.

"I don't see why you say 'must,' " she observed. "If it refers to this problematical affair between Helen Clapp and Jenkins, it could be from some one who had access to Jenkins—some jealous woman, for choice."

"Yes, there's that. But if that's so, why isn't it more specific? My guess was it referred to the private use of that stairway."

"Speaking of which," said Violet, "doesn't it strike you as odd that Mrs. Clapp, senior, claims not to know that stairway's been in use all this time? Now really, Mordaunt, she's a smart old lady—and she isn't deaf that I recall."

Peel's eyes glinted.

"You always do hit the nail on the head, darling. I'll ask her a few questions."

"I remember," said Violet dreamily; "when I was young, I used to go to bed dutifully at nine and then climb out the window and go walking with my first beau. He had the longest lashes I ever saw. It was an awful shock to me years later when I found out mother had known about it all the time."

"Violet!"

She patted my hand.

"I was shocked too, darling. But she said he was a thoroughly nice boy and I seemed to be having such a good time using the window."

Peel laughed.

"You win! But if Mrs. Clapp knows all about it, why doesn't she say so? After all, she gave the letter to Mottram."

"But there hadn't been a murder—then."

"I see." Peel's face was suddenly grave.

"On the other hand," said Violet, "there's always the chance that old Mrs. Clapp wrote that letter herself."

Peel stared at her.

"Good Lord! I never thought of that."

Violet patted his hand.

"You're so trusting, darling. Let's see the other letter."

Peel passed it over.

ASK BOYD JENKINS WHAT HE KNOWS ABOUT
"MADAM BUTTERFLY." YOU'D BETTER DO
THIS FOR YOUR OWN PROTECTION.

Violet ruffled her bright hair with a nervous hand. She looks very pretty with her hair in confusion and I have no doubt she knows it.

"Now that's funny," she said. "Just plumb funny. Why wasn't that sent to Helen Clapp?"

"Perhaps," said Peel politely, "you do know what you are talking about."

"Must I do all your work for you, darling? Of course, you know Boyd Jenkins spent a couple of years in China."

"But 'Madame Butterfly' lived in Japan."

"Near enough."

"I see what you mean. We'll have to get a dossier on Jenkins."

Violet bit her lip. I thought she looked suddenly rather pale.

"Well, that's all my bright ideas. I believe I'll go to bed. I'm all in."

Peel looked at her searchingly. For a moment their eyes clashed. Then he said slowly:

"I see," he said, "I see!"

"Lucy's my best friend!" cried Violet.

"My dear girl," said Peel, "you ought to know better than to use that argument to me."

"If you're going to quarrel," I suggested, "you might at least let me in on it."

"Jonas, how long has Philip Radnor been in Baltimore?" asked Peel.

"About five years. He told me so only the other day."

"And Boyd Jenkins?"

"A year or so."

"Where'd he come from?"

"I seem to remember he came from Havana. He was on a newspaper down there."

"And before that?"

"How would I know? I hardly knew the fellow."

"Well," said Peel, "it ought to be possible to find out. I suppose you don't know where Radnor came from?"

"New York, I think."

"Yes," said Violet: "New York."

"New York, the gate to the Western Hemisphere!" said Peel sententiously. "Forgive me, Violet?"

There were tears in her eyes.

"What business is it of yours?" she asked shakily.

"Your interest begins and ends with the letters."

"I wouldn't have paid any attention to the letters—if Jenkins hadn't been killed. There's nothing illegal about an anonymous letter—unless it's indecent, tends to incite murder or arson, attempts to extort money by threats of violence or uses the mails to defraud. I might have looked into the matter unofficially, since Mottram and Lucy Shanks asked me to, but professionally, there was nothing in it—until the murder. That puts a different complexion on it. I'm going to find out who wrote those letters—and any information I get goes to the police."

Violet smiled shakily and wiped her eyes with my handkerchief.

"All right, darling. But if you let them pin it on

Philip Radnor, I'll—I'll make Jonas forbid you the house."

Peel looked at her steadily.

"We've got to have the truth, haven't we?" he said.

"Even if Lucy is your best friend—especially if Lucy is your best friend—we must have the truth."

"The truth!" sighed Violet. "Sometimes I'm afraid of the truth."

How many times during the turbulent weeks that followed I was to remember this conversation, and wonder, if it had not been for that suggestion of Violet's—but no, surely the result would have been the same. At any rate, that was what I assured her on that awful night, never to be forgotten by either of us, when I woke from my uneasy nightmare and found her crying quietly into her pillow.

The nightmare was a particularly vivid picture of a hanging. I remember that I could not see who it was that was being hanged, for the black hood had already been drawn over the victim's head, and I was torn by a horrible anxiety, broken in on by Violet's muffled sobs.

"It's my fault," she cried, as soon as she knew I was awake. "All my fault."

"No," I assured her. "Of course it's not your fault. It would have happened just the same anyway."

But I was not sure. I have never been able to make up my mind.

CHAPTER XI

Tuesday, December 12. 11 p.m.

"Look here," said Peel, when Violet had gone to bed.

"Did you ever hear of Bessie Kingsley?"

"I've been around," I admitted, grinning.

"Well, get your hat. We're going to see her."

I was surprised, to put it mildly, but in the course of years I had learned not to ask questions. I got my hat.

We went out together into the bitter night. It was still snowing and the wind had come up. Peel's car looked like an Eskimo igloo. We got in and closed the doors gratefully.

"Why Bessie Kingsley?" I asked.

Peel pressed his foot on the starter and when the motor was humming satisfactorily, released the hand-brake and let in the clutch.

"Because," he told me, "Jenkins has been seen around there a lot for the last six months."

"Jenkins and who else?"

"Don't be vulgar, Jonas." We drove several blocks in silence. At last Peel said: "Violet's right, you know. It could be a woman's crime."

"Are you thinking of Bessie Kingsley or Mrs. Clapp?" I asked.

And then Peel said a staggering thing.

"Which Mrs. Clapp?"

Which rendered me speechless for the rest of our brief journey.

A few minutes later we drew up in front of a pretentious apartment house on Eutaw Place. It had been a swanky place, no doubt—say about nineteen-ten. The lobby was decorated with the imitation marble and

gaudy frescoes so popular at that time. But it had run down. The paint was peeling from the marble pillars and the frescoes were faded and dirty. A coloured boy in a dingy uniform lounged at a telephone desk in a little alcove.

"Mrs. Kingsley in?" asked Peel.

"I'll tell the world," said the coloured boy. "You can hear it goin' on!"

He jerked a shoulder in the general direction of the stairs. We could hear it. From the upper regions came the unmistakable sounds of a party in progress. A blaring radio, half drowned out by shrieking voices and stamping feet.

"You friends of hers," the boy went on, "you tell her the p'lice be in here d'rec'ly. We got about a bushel o' complaints."

"Take us up," said Peel.

The boy got to his feet grudgingly and shambled into the elevator cage. We followed him.

As we went up, the ancient cage creaking and groaning alarmingly, the noise increased. At the fourth floor the elevator ground to a stop. The boy opened the door.

"Last on the right."

The directions were superfluous. The door at the end of the hall stood ajar, spilling uproar. The boy leaned limply in his cage, watching us. I followed Peel and we entered unceremoniously.

We found ourselves in a small, dimly-lighted hall, in one corner of which a young man and a black-haired girl were kissing with such absorption that they paid no attention to us whatever. The hall opened through a wide archway into a big room in which half a dozen couples were dancing to the deafening shriek of a radio, turned on full blast. And beyond that, through another archway, was another room containing an improvised

bar. Here a blond man with prominent eyes was busy with a cocktail shaker.

Peel crossed the dance floor and looked into this farther room. Nobody stopped us, or indeed, paid any attention to us.

"Not here," he said.

"Hello!" said the man with the cocktail shaker.

"Have a drink!"

"Where's Mrs. Kingsley?"

"How in hell should I know? One thing at a time is my motto."

We went on into a back hall from which opened three doors. The one on the right stood open. It led into a large bedroom decorated in the style of a third-rate Hollywood movie. The windows were draped in elaborately ruffled rose-coloured taffeta, rather soiled, and the huge bed, pseudo Louis-Quinze, was covered with a spread of the same material, decorated with baby blue taffeta roses and strewn with a lot of fussy, lace-trimmed pillows.

Hunched on a chaise-longue near the window, a woman in a green dress looked at us sombrely under heavily-mascaraed lashes.

I had never seen Bessie Kingsley before but I had heard a lot about her, and I observed her now with what I must confess was a distinct quickening of interest.

She was supposed to be the widow of an army officer who had been cashiered because of some scandal connected with a native girl in China a few years before. He had subsequently drunk himself to death and Bessie Kingsley had returned to Baltimore, to the manicure shop whence she came.

It was reported that she was a very hard-boiled lady indeed, and what with the scandal of her husband's career and her own intractable attitude, she had been

received with a blank stare and a cold shoulder by the women of her home town. The men, however, found her amusing. She had wit, she was good-looking, and she possessed the gift of an easy, unexacting camaraderie. Her apartment became a regular hang-out for the unattached men about town.

The scandalous tales told about her would have blistered the ears, if words could blister. But the people who knew her insisted she was a decent sort. I was frankly curious.

In one respect, rumour was certainly correct.

She was undoubtedly a handsome woman, somewhere, I should guess, between twenty-five and thirty, her figure of the general type of slender plumpness which has been immortalised by Mae West. Her face, heavily, yet expertly made up, possessed a sullen vigour that, disguised as it was with rounded curves and a dimple in the cheek, was very striking. Her poise had that rock-like quality that no disturbance can shake. She looked at us as we entered and she neither moved or spoke.

"Mrs. Kingsley?" said Peel with a rising inflection.

She might have been a wax model in Madame Tussaud's, for all the reaction she showed, but no wax was ever so intensely alive as she. I thought for a moment she was drunk. There was a half-empty glass on a little table beside her. But she wasn't. Her eyes were perfectly cool, shrewdly appraising.

"I'm Post Office Inspector Peel and this is my friend, Mr. Jonas Aiken."

Her eyes moved from his face to mine and back again. At last she said:

"Well, I haven't been robbing the mails."

Her voice was low and rich, husky from too many cigarettes.

"I've come about something else," Peel told her. "I want to talk to you about—Mr. Boyd Jenkins."

She sat up then. She was like a simmering flame caught in a sudden draught.

"I hope to God you get the woman that did it."

"Who?"

She settled back again sullenly.

"Helen Clapp, of course. I warned him he was getting in over his head, hanging round her like he did, but he wouldn't listen to me." She laughed with a sort of surprised scorn. "Damned if I don't think he was getting social ambitions! He ought to have known people like that would never forgive him for being what he was. He was a funny fellow, and that woman Clapp picked him up like she'd pick up one of these freak lap dogs. Want to know what he did when I told him that?"

"I wouldn't mind," drawled Peel. He had lighted a cigarette and sat tilted back in a flimsy gilt chair, watching her through the smoke.

She grinned—a contorted grin that showed the pink gums above her strong white teeth.

"He was smoking, like you are, and he leaned over and jabbed the lighted end of his cigarette on my shoulder."

She pulled down the shoulder of her green dress and showed us the scab of a newly-healed burn.

"Charming fellow," said Peel.

Her eyes turned coldly on him.

"Well, he was worth a dozen of her, the stuck-up——"

"You were—fond of him?"

"Look here!" She leaned forward. "Get me straight. Jenk and I were friends long ago in China. He stood by me when I was having a pretty lousy time. He stood by me when I came back here and

got a quick cold shoulder. If you want to keep that dame safe for the hangman, you'd better lock her up quick."

"What do you think happened?"

"I don't think. I know what happened. He's been trotting round to her place two—three times a week since the fall. Sometimes there'd be other people there and sometimes not. She picked him up like I say—like any other freak, people could laugh at."

"Was there anything between them?"

She laughed shrilly.

"That's a scream! Why would he fall for a wooden-faced Indian like her?"

"Then why did he go?"

"Listen, Inspector. Jenk was a funny fellow. For all he was so hard-boiled, there was a streak in him. He couldn't help it. He didn't even know it. But there was part of him that still believed in Santa Claus. You take and put him in a place like that Clapp house, where everything's smooth and people talk nice and gentle, and you have a girl like that Helen Clapp tell him he's a nice guy and smart and amusing, and he'd believe it was so, and they all were the same as they seemed to be. And you couldn't tell him different. And when she started making that statue of him, it was all over but the shouting."

"All right," said Peel, "suppose Mrs. Clapp did want to get rid of him. There are other ways besides shooting."

Her face settled back into its pose of sullen rigidity.

"Not Boyd Jenkins," she said. "Not if he didn't want to go."

Peel said nothing. After a moment she went on:

"He was a fool, but he was smart as hell. You didn't have to tell him anything twice. And when he was mad he could be meaner than any one alive. You

see he was vain, but he never could kid himself two days running that he had anything to be vain about. That was why he got such a kick out of Helen Clapp—and that's why he'd have paid her out if she slapped his face for him."

"But after all," Peel reminded her, "it was Helen Clapp—according to your theory—that did the paying out."

"Figure it out," she retorted. "You got all the cards."

"You mean she told him she was through and he got mad and threatened her? Blackmail?"

She grinned again—that curious grin that was like a snarl.

"Don't look so shocked," she said in mincing tones. "You don't think Jenk swanked it around the way he did on the salary he got for his column, do you?"

She blew a series of very expert smoke rings and squinted her eyes at them thoughtfully.

"I'll bet there are a lot of people round town who are taking bromides to-night."

"Where'd he cache his stuff?"

"How would I know? He was close-mouthed about that sort of thing."

"Safe deposit box?"

"Maybe. You got as good a right to guess as any one."

Peel tamped out his cigarette in the lap of a little china angel who squatted on the dressing-table. He leaned toward her and spoke in an easy, confidential tone.

"Mrs. Kingsley, do you know the story of 'Madame Butterfly'?"

She had extraordinary command of herself. One had to admire it. But some involuntary contraction broke and shivered the smoke ring she was blowing.

"That's not the kind of opera I go to."

"Did Jenkins know it, do you think?"

She said nothing at all for what must have been a full minute.

"How did you get on to that?"

"Some one wrote a letter to Lucy Shanks."

"The dirty dog!"

She frowned at the floor. For the moment she even forgot to conceal that she was profoundly shaken. Then she got to her feet and began to move around the room with a prowling gait, the muscles moving like the muscles of a big cat under her smooth dress. The blond man with prominent eyes who had been juggling the cocktail shaker put his head in the door. She flung round at him.

"Get the hell out of here!"

"Oh," said the man. He went away after a quick glance at us.

At last she said:

"Did Jenkins write that letter?"

"No."

"Who did?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

She bristled at that.

"Look here, if you think I did it, you've got me all wrong. I suppose I'm hard-boiled enough—you gotta be these days—but there's things I stick at—and that's one of 'em."

Peel reached across from where he sat to a little writing-desk, designed more for ornament than use, that stood beside the door. From its open pigeon holes he drew a sheet of pink letter paper and a pink envelope, lined with blue. I could feel my eyes bulging. Bessie Kingsley paused in her stride and watched him.

He took the two anonymous letters from his pocket

and spread them out on the leaf of the desk. There could be no doubt that the paper was the same.

"I had that paper made for me," said Bessie Kingsley in a strange voice, "at Funk and Howells."

She leaned over Peel's shoulder and read the two letters. He made no effort to prevent her. When she had finished, she made a queer sort of despairing gesture.

"Are you trying to tell me," she said, "that I've got this sized up all wrong?"

Peel said nothing.

"I suppose there's no use my telling you I didn't write those things?"

"There might be," said Peel, "if you'd tell me what it's all about."

But the moment—if there had been a moment—had passed.

"I've told my story."

"But not all of it," said Peel. "It would be better all round if you told the rest."

"No," she said. "That's where you're wrong."

"Who has had access to that desk the last week or so?"

"Dozens of people. You see the place to-night. Well, it's like that—only not quite so much so—most of the time. People come and go. They think it's a bar."

"Your maid?"

"Mamie? Sure. But what would be the idea?"

"I don't know, but I'd like to see her."

Mrs. Kingsley stuck her head out the door and yelled: "Mamie."

But Mamie, when she appeared, betrayed nothing more startling than a row of very white teeth—which were startling enough in contrast to her ebony-black skin. She vigorously denied any knowledge of stolen

letter paper. Peel let her go after a brisk but futile cross-examination.

"All right," he said. "Now who else?"

"My God, man, I don't know. A lot of people."

"For instance."

She gave him a list of names—a fairly long one, and Mamie was recalled to supplement it. When he had finished, Peel slipped it into his pocket and picked up the letters.

"You'd better not try a walk-out," he said. "I'll be needing you."

"There's no reason for me to walk out."

"Good," said Peel. "After what you told me, I thought perhaps there might be. Social ambition's all very well, but I should think, when she was all dressed up, Mrs. Clapp might be a very attractive woman."

Bessie Kingsley's hands clenched and unclenched themselves—once. For that instant her face looked ravaged. Then she laughed.

"You do think I'm a dumb cluck, don't you? I wouldn't have told you that if I didn't have a castiron alibi."

"No," admitted Peel, "I don't suppose you would. What is your alibi?"

"I was having a Turkish bath, if you want to know, at that place on Howard Street. I was there from eleven o'clock till almost two. And if you know any place that's harder to slip out of than a Turkish bath, I'd like to know it."

"I don't," said Peel. "You couldn't have planned it better."

"No, I couldn't. That's right."

On the way out Peel accosted the blond man with the cocktail shaker.

"Nobody seems to introduce any one here," he said. "My name's Peel. Who are you?"

"Glad to meet you," averred the blond man, a little unsteadily. "My name's Vincent—Larry Vincent. Has anybody given you a drink?"

"Vincent," repeated Peel. "I've seen you somewhere. You're at the Baltimore Midtown Bank, aren't you?"

"Yes," admitted Vincent. "Cashier." He did not look too pleased. I thought he glanced rather sharply at Peel.

But Peel dropped the subject. He looked casually around the room.

"Wild bunch, aren't they?"

"I don't know what you mean. They're having a good time." He frowned uneasily.

"Know Mrs. Kingsley well?"

"So-so," said Vincent shortly.

"Good sort, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is," said Larry Vincent. "She likes horseplay, and she poses as pretty hard-boiled, but there's not a bit of harm in Bessie Kingsley."

His manner had a touch of defiance, as though he were answering an accusation.

"That's what I say," agreed Peel with a faint smile.

We went away, leaving Vincent staring after us with a perplexed, half-angry look.

CHAPTER XII

Wednesday, December 13. 7.30 a.m.

VIOLET was up early next morning and I heard her talking over the telephone to Lucy Shanks. I believe she made an engagement to lunch with her downtown, but of this I am not sure, for by the time the conversation had got around to that point I had given up any hope of further sleep and had retired to the bathroom with my newspaper in high dudgeon.

At breakfast Violet was uncommunicative. There were blue lines under her eyes and I fancied she had not slept much. But I forebore to question her. Solitude of that kind always irritates Violet. Her coffee seemed to revive her. She lit a cigarette and asked if Jenkins had a sister or a female relative.

"I don't know," I told her. "Is it important?"

"I can imagine that it might be," she said with what I thought unreasonable gravity. "It would be even better if he had a lady friend."

"He certainly had a lady friend," I told her. "We went to see her last night."

"So that's where you were," said Violet, making a face at me. "Who is she?"

"A Mrs. Bessie Kingsley." And I told her about the pink letter paper.

Violet's eyes glowed.

"Does Mordaunt think she wrote those letters?" she asked when I had finished.

"No. But I think he's wrong. After all, she knew about the visits to Helen Clapp, and about this mysterious 'Madame Butterfly' business—whatever that is."

"Don't you really know what that is about?" asked Violet curiously.

"Not the foggiest," I admitted.

"Darling Jonas!" said Violet exasperatingly. But her lip quivered. "I feel," she said after a moment, and with a distinct gulp, "as if I were sitting on a keg of dynamite."

And for a while nothing more was said. Violet devoted herself to the orange marmalade, and I to my newspaper.

"This Bessie Kingsley," said Violet at last. "Is she well turned out—well groomed?"

"She takes Turkish baths," I grumbled to the middle of the sporting page.

"Oh, really, Jonas!" Violet thrust down her napkin and got to her feet. And then, to my surprise and consternation, she burst into tears. "Sorry!" she gasped. "Couldn't sleep. Kept running round in my head like a mouse in a trap." And she fled from the room.

I left the house a few minutes later, for it had been arranged the night before that Bullitt and I were to meet in Peel's office at nine and go around together to interview the Clapps.

It really was the most incredible day—one of those sudden changes of temperature that make the Baltimore climate so disconcerting. The mercury must have gone up thirty degrees. The clouds still hung low and the air was thick with a raw, wet fog of melting snow. My foot ached with the peculiar, dull insistence of an ulcerated tooth, and altogether I was in a pretty lousy humour when I stumped into Peel's office.

Bullitt was already there and he and Peel were bent over a small pile of papers on the desk. An open brief case from which apparently they had been dumped, lay on a chair near by.

"Nice little haul, Jonas," said Peel with a grin. "Contents of Jenkins' safe deposit box."

"We found the key sewed into his mattress," Bullitt told me. "Got the box open late last night."

Peel slipped the letter he had been reading back into its envelope, gathered the little pile together and flicked it through.

"Eight," he said thoughtfully. "Eight sound little reasons for—murder." He looked for a moment with narrowed eyes at the gray square of window. And his expression was a little bleak. "Eight prominent and respectable citizens—oh, how respectable!—who would pay through the nose—and go on paying—to prevent these little documents coming to the attention of the public. Unless, of course, one of them got tired of paying."

"We'll just check up on their alibis, to be on the safe side," said Bullitt.

He made a swift list of names. Then Peel placed the papers in the safe and closed the door.

It was no doubt my perfervid imagination, but it seemed to me, when Joseph admitted us at the door of the house on Mt. Vernon Square, as though the house itself awaited us with a kind of breathless expectancy. The big, shadowy hall was full of dread. The dark library in which yesterday had lain the body of Boyd Jenkins seemed to accept our presence with silent foreboding.

While we waited, we had very little to say. I think both Peel and Bullitt, although this sort of thing is so much a part of the routine of their lives, were nevertheless impressed, as I was, with a sense of approaching climax. It was in the air—the dark, furtive, shadowy air of that dark, old house.

Peel standing at the window, looking out into the back yard, dingy with smoke-sooted snow, said:

"There's a covered passage to the garage. Must run flat with the one next door."

"Yes," said Bullitt. "It opens, through the small study, into the back hall, near the door into the next house. But we couldn't find anything."

"Door locked?"

"Yes, but it's one of those spring locks that latches itself."

That was all.

A moment later the smart maid appeared in the doorway.

"Mrs. Clapp would be glad if you'd step upstairs to her sitting-room, sir," she said, including us all in a swift, circular glance.

We followed her up the dark stairs.

The sitting-room was a good deal more cheerful. A bright fire snapped on the hearth, and softened the bluish tinge of the light with a ruddy glow. Reflected in a big gilt-framed mirror on the opposite wall, the flames danced and twinkled on a hundred smaller surfaces: the little porcelain figures in a cabinet near the door, the glass in the many picture frames that crowded the walls and tables, the polished depths of mahogany and rosewood.

Old Mrs. Clapp, again in black satin with lace at throat and wrists, sat bolt upright in a big arm-chair, by the hearth. Beside her, warming his back at the fire, stood Henry Clapp.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," said old Mrs. Clapp in her dry, brittle voice. "My daughter-in-law has been told you wish to see her. She will join us in a moment. What can we do for you?"

I was impressed as I looked from one face to the other with the strong likeness between mother and son.

He had her eyes and her handsome, well-modelled nose and chin. But in him the acerbity and vigour of wit and character had been toned down and smoothed over into a smooth uniformity of good manners.

Peel began without preliminaries.

"Mrs. Clapp, how long have you known that the stairway of the house next door was being used?"

"My mother has already told you," Henry Clapp broke in, "that to the best of her belief, the door was nailed up several years ago."

"I don't question that," said Peel politely, and continued to look at Mrs. Clapp.

She returned his stare belligerently.

"All right, Inspector," she said at last, "I don't see what difference it makes, but I've known about the use of the stairway for a long time. Almost as long as it has been used."

"And how did you find it out?"

"I heard talking and laughter moving up and down in a supposedly empty house. And my daughter-in-law's friends virtually stopped coming to our front door. I hope I have sufficient wit left to put two and two together."

"And was your son aware of your knowledge?"

"My son has my complete confidence in all things, Mr. Peel."

She looked up at the tall man beside her and swiftly looked away, but not before I had seen the helpless adoration in her eyes. And I knew that, shrewd as she was, she saw her son only through the veil of her devotion.

Henry Clapp cleared his throat importantly.

"As a matter of fact, I discussed the use of the stairway with my mother. I felt that in a sense, her trust was being abused. But she took what I must call a larger view. She said she had no objection, if it suited my

wife to have her friends come and go through the other house."

The old lady looked down at the hands in her lap and her mouth was bitter. It seemed to me, that although she understood, she would never forgive Helen Clapp her desire for independence, that she submitted only because she feared the younger woman would retaliate for any objection that might be raised by demanding a house of her own.

"I take it," said Peel dryly, "that Helen Clapp was not informed about this discussion."

"My wife and I," said Henry Clapp loftily, "have never found it necessary to tell each other everything."

"And just about that time," said Peel softly, "such confidence as existed between you received a sharp setback."

Henry Clapp's easy nonchalance stiffened, and his mother sat in her chair with a wooden face.

"I don't know what you mean."

"I was referring to the fact that some months ago your wife suggested that it would be more comfortable all round if you moved down into the room that had been your father's."

Henry Clapp's face crimsoned. He opened his mouth to speak, but only a strangled sigh came from it. And then we all became aware of Helen Clapp standing in the doorway of the room and looking at us.

Although, like most men, I find it difficult to analyse the details of a woman's appearance and am content with a very general impression, there is something about Helen Clapp that challenges a closer attention. I saw at once that this morning when she dressed, she had put her mind into it, and had achieved a result of such distinction as is seldom seen in the town of Baltimore. I wondered why she had bothered. A gesture of defiance,

perhaps, to this little world of hers which condemned her for being what she was?

"Just why are you so interested in my private concerns, Inspector Peel?"

The atmosphere of the room had changed subtly. We had two opposing camps now, and both of them armed. Peel did not answer the question put to him. Instead, he turned to the old lady.

"Why did you show that letter to Commissioner Mottram, Mrs. Clapp?"

I could see now that she had been waiting in dread for this question. She held her eyes in a visible effort from her son's face.

"I should prefer to talk to you in private about that, Mr. Peel."

"What letter?" Henry Clapp looked from Peel to his mother. Clearly in this, at least, she had not consulted him.

Peel took the pink envelope from his pocket and gave it to him. As he read, the blood slowly left his face. When he looked down at his mother there was something new in his expression.

"You showed this letter to Mottram? Why?"

Her hands fluttered tremulously. She looked at him and looked away.

"It seemed to me that some one was interesting themselves unwarrantably in our affairs. I wanted to find out who it was."

"And so you gave this to the Police Commissioner. Good God, Mother, you must have lost your mind."

"I don't think so," said Helen Clapp softly. "I don't think so, Henry." She came a few steps nearer and looked down at her mother-in-law, and, in spite of the bared sword between them, there was a look—yes, almost of comprehension in her eyes. "You did it deliberately, didn't you?"

"Yes," said old Mrs. Clapp. "Yes, I did, Helen."

"You thought I was ruining Henry's life, didn't you? And he wouldn't divorce me. And so, when the letter came into your hands, you decided to force the issue. And then afterwards—afterwards you were afraid Henry would be angry."

Henry Clapp collapsed. Between them, they had beaten him—taken from him the last rag of decent covering for his pride. He dropped into a big chair by the fire and bent his face on his hand.

"I'm sorry, Henry," said his wife. "You won't be bothered any more. I'm going to do what I should have done long ago. I'm going to leave you. My things are pretty well packed—except the studio stuff. I'll send for them. And now——" She turned and looked at us—"—now that you know all about everything, won't you be merciful and go away?" Her lips quivered and her eyes were full of tears. She was magnificent in her angry pain.

Bullitt came into lumbering action.

"There's just one little question I want to ask first: Mr. Clapp, just why did you shoot Boyd Jenkins?"

For a long, painful moment there was no sound at all in the room except the crackle of the fire on the hearth. Then Henry Clapp looked up. His face was as white as paper.

"I—I don't believe I heard you correctly."

"You heard me all right. Why did you shoot Boyd Jenkins?"

"Henry!" cried old Mrs. Clapp in a warning tone.

"Be still, Mother. You've done enough damage already. I didn't shoot Jenkins."

"Then what were you doing in the empty house between—say—twelve-fifteen and one?"

Clapp wet his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"I wasn't there. You're either bluffing or—misinformed."

Peel broke in politely.

"Perhaps you'd like me to refresh your memory. You remember, of course, going to the Walters' Gallery at twelve?"

Clapp nodded.

"It was just twelve. I happened to glance at my watch as I went in."

"And mentioned the fact to Jim Tulin, an attendant," agreed Peel. "You chatted with him for a few minutes and then you went back into the part of the gallery where the offices are—and the stairway to the back door. There was no one there. You turned off the burglar alarm and went down to the door. After all if any one missed you, they'd think you were busy somewhere else. You are a director."

Clapp said nothing. He stared at Peel as if he had been hypnotised.

"You had a pass-key. You unlocked the door and slipped out. It was snowing heavily, and anyway the row of garages concealed you from the rear windows of the houses on Mt. Vernon Square. You walked along to the garage attached to the Sutter house. You had the keys in your pocket, so you opened the door, and again the door from the passage into the house, and went in."

Henry Clapp made a feeble attempt at laughter.

"Pure imagination. You can't prove a word of it."

"Perhaps not," agreed Peel. "But I can prove that you were in the Sutter house, and that's about the only way you could have got there, since Jim Tulin is prepared to swear you did not leave the Gallery by the front door until you left it an hour after the murder—about two o'clock."

Henry Clapp said nothing. After a moment Peel went on:

"You knew that Jenkins was to be in your wife's studio that morning."

Helen Clapp put her hand to her throat. She was very pale. Her eyes were fixed on her husband. Peel continued:

"I don't know what you expected—what you were looking for. Whether you imagined an affair was going on, or whether there was some question of Jenkins' blackmailing you—I don't know. But I know you went upstairs—probably to the studio door, listening.

"Then," said Peel, "you heard Jenkins preparing to leave, so you hid in one of the empty rooms. And when he went down, you followed him, as far as the second floor. Perhaps you intended to speak to him, when you got down where Mrs. Clapp couldn't hear you. Or perhaps you'd satisfied yourself that there was no reason for interference. Anyway you followed him—to the second floor. And then something happened."

He paused. Watching Henry Clapp, I saw his face blanch and stiffen.

"You leaned over the rail to look down, and something happened—something so unexpected and terrifying that you jerked back out of range, so that no one, looking up, could see you. I suggest that this terrifying thing was the sound of a pistol shot—downstairs.

"I suggest further," said Peel, "that you made some movement—some sound. Perhaps you thought Jenkins had shot himself and you were starting to investigate. At any rate you heard some one moving downstairs, and perhaps a door closing—and then, at last, you went down. And all you found was Boyd Jenkins lying, as you thought, dead in his own blood."

Again that racking, shuddering breath.

"There seemed to be nothing you could do for him, so you went out the way you had come, locking the doors after you. You slipped in the back door of the

Gallery and locked that, too. Then, as soon as you'd got rid of the snow on your shoes and coat, you went out into the front gallery where there was an attendant, and made yourself conspicuous for an hour or so before you left. Outside you met Marcus White, and when he told you about the murder you drove with him and pretended you knew nothing about it. Pretended, with your broken watch chain dangling and your lost penknife lying in the empty house next door."

There was a long, painful pause in which Henry Clapp's laboured breathing sounded loud above the crackle of the fire.

"You are wrong. If you found my penknife there, I must have dropped it another time—on Monday. I was in there on Monday, but not yesterday."

Peel sat back with a shrug.

"Well, Sergeant——"

Bullitt got to his feet. He had been waiting, fidgeting impatiently, for this moment.

"Mr. Clapp, I have a warrant for your arrest for the murder of Boyd Jenkins."

Clapp staggered to his feet and backed against the mantel. His mother was beside him, her arm flung out in front of him as if in protection.

"He didn't do it—he didn't do it!"

Henry Clapp spoke with difficulty.

"You're bluffing. You couldn't get a warrant on the strength of a penknife that might have been lost any time."

"I don't think," said Peel, "you quite grasp the strength of our position. Sergeant Bullitt has located the watchman who was on duty yesterday at the Gallery. It seems he made his rounds at twelve-thirty and discovered that the burglar alarm had been turned off and the back door unlocked. He said nothing but waited. He saw you come in at one o'clock, lock the door and

turn on the alarm. He didn't know what to do about it, for of course you are a director. So he did nothing, meaning to speak to the curator about it at the first opportunity."

Henry Clapp looked across his mother's head at his wife.

"Helen, are you going to let them take me?"

She turned away. In the gray light from the window her face was a death mask. Henry Clapp looked at Peel.

"Do I understand," he said hoarsely, "that you offer me an alternative?"

"Tentatively," Peel told him. "If you will tell us the whole truth."

"All right," said Henry Clapp. "I'll talk."

Bullitt returned the warrant to his pocket with a disappointed air and got out his notebook.

"You're so nearly right," said Henry Clapp, "that you might almost have been there. I'd been frantic for months because of the estrangement between my wife and myself. And at last I thought, when Jenkins started hanging round, that I'd found the reason. I see now"—he cast a swift look at Helen's averted head—"I see now I was—mistaken. I should have known it before, I dare say—I'm—sorry."

"As you say, I knew he was going to be at the studio yesterday morning. I had to prove to myself whether I was right or wrong. If I was right, I had made up my mind to divorce my wife. But I still had a little sanity left. I still knew I might be wrong. So I——"

"You were right in every particular, except that I did not go in through the garage of the Sutter house. I intended to and had the keys with me, but I found that some one had pushed up the catch of the spring lock, and the key would not turn. So I decided to risk going in through our own garage. No one saw me and I was able

to slip through the door in the back hall into the empty house."

"So that," said Peel softly, "is how that door came to be unlocked."

"It wasn't unlocked," said Bullitt. "I unlocked it myself when you knocked."

Peel motioned him to be silent and Clapp went on:

"I shut the door after me but didn't lock it. In my agitation I had left the key on the other side. I went upstairs, and as you suggested, listened at the studio door."

Helen Clapp turned now and looked at him—held him with her eyes.

"It must have been interesting," she said, and her lip curled. "As I remember, we spent a good deal of time cursing the weather."

"You did," said Henry Clapp. "I heard you. And I heard something else."

"Henry!" Her tone was full of hopeless entreaty.

"What did you hear?" asked Peel.

"I heard the telephone ring."

"Yes?"

Clapp averted his eyes from the scorn in his wife's face.

"Helen asked Jenkins to answer it, as her hands were covered with clay. He did so and then he said: 'It's for me, anyway.' I could hear him talking over the phone. At first he seemed to be objecting to something and then he said, 'Oh, all right, all right. I'll meet you downstairs at quarter of one.' Then he rang off and said to Helen: 'That was Philip Radnor. I'll have to get on. He's going to pick me up next door in a few minutes. Says he wants to talk to me.'"

Peel looked at Mrs. Clapp.

"Is this true?"

She threw out her hands in a despairing gesture as if to say: "What's the use of denying it?"

"And then?"

"I went into one of the empty third-story rooms to wait until Jenkins had gone, and while I was waiting, I heard a door open downstairs and some one come in. After that, it all happened just as you describe—although how you figured it out I don't know. I followed Jenkins down and had just reached the second floor when I heard some one speak to him. He was just going out the front door, but he turned and went along the hall toward the dining-room.

"And then——" He hesitated, the sweat breaking out on his forehead at the remembrance. "Then I heard the shot."

"No more talking?"

"No. He must have been shot as soon as he entered the dining-room."

"And then?"

"I lost my head for a moment. I started upstairs again. And then I realised I couldn't do that, so I stood still and waited, I could hear a very slight sound downstairs, as though some one were tiptoeing. And then a door closing very softly, and a key turning."

"What door?"

"The door under the stairs—the door into this house."

Our eyes were glued to his face. You could have heard a pin drop. Peel breathed once——

"Ah!" And I knew this was what he had been waiting for.

"You're sure it was that door?"

"It must have been. The front door won't close as softly as that—and the rear-door hinges squeak—as I discovered later."

"The automatic, Sergeant," said Peel. "He meant

to leave it by the body, but he daren't. He doesn't know where this unknown person is. So he takes it with him. He daren't make for the front door or the back door for fear he may be seen. The door into the next house is behind him—and miraculously it opens—under the stairs. Miss Wren's bag is within reach. He drops the pistol in, knowing it will be found, but not too soon. And he makes his way out, as Mr. Clapp came in, through the back passage and the garage."

But Bullitt had not finished with Clapp.

"And then, Mr. Clapp?"

"I waited a minute but I heard nothing and no one came. Then I went down."

In his voice and attitude was the horror of that creeping descent.

"I saw Jenkins lying there—dead, I thought. I was afraid to go out the front door or to return through this house. I tried the rear door. Of course the spring lock worked readily enough from the inside although the hinges were stiff. I went out through the garage and back to the Gallery. That's all I know. Before God that's all I know."

He sank down into his chair again, his head on his hands.

"You did not catch a glimpse of the murderer?"

"No."

"You recognised his voice?"

"No."

"On your oath, Mr. Clapp, was it the voice of Philip Radnor?"

"I tell you I don't know. It might have been anyone's voice—low and very faint."

Peel made a gesture as of a prosecuting attorney giving over a witness for cross-examination.

"All right," he said. "Now I want to see the servants."

His face was grave, but full of that stubborn, eager energy that comes to him at moments like this.

I turned to follow him from the room but halted suddenly, stricken with astonishment. There was a long, gilt framed mirror against the wall, between the door and the fireplace. And in that mirror I saw old Mrs. Clapp's face. She was standing in front of her chair facing her daughter-in-law, and there was in her eyes a look of such flaming, undisguised, primitive hatred as I had never seen before and will never forget.

I grasped Peel's arm when we were out in the hall. "You saw?"

He nodded.

"That might be another reason why the gun was in Matilda Wren's bag," I muttered as we went downstairs.

Peel said nothing, but his face in the half-light was white and grim.

CHAPTER XIII

Wednesday, December 13. 10 p.m.

A CLOSE cross-examination of the servants disclosed no one who had seen Henry Clapp on Tuesday between the time he left the house after breakfast and the time he returned with Marc White about two o'clock.

Old Mrs. Clapp had been closeted with Miss Wren for an hour or so and had then come downstairs to inspect the arrangement of flowers in the drawing-room.

Peel, scenting a discrepancy, went upstairs again to question her. But the old lady stuck angrily to her original statement.

"I told you," she insisted, "that Matilda came downstairs at quarter of one, and so she did. I saw her pass the drawing-room door."

Peel stared at her sombrely.

"You didn't tell me you'd already come down yourself."

"You didn't ask me," she snapped.

"And you are certain you saw no one come through the door from the Sutter house?"

"I am positive. I went upstairs again almost at once." Peel returned thoughtfully to his examination of the servants.

They all swore that to the best of their knowledge, Helen Clapp had not been downstairs at all that day until she came down in response to Bullitt's summons. And no one had seen a strange man in the hall or anywhere else about the house.

Joseph, the butler, however, remembered, after his initial terror had subsided, that he had seen the upholsterer's man going out through the back passage not long before the alarm was sounded. Asked how he knew it was the upholsterer's man, he admitted that he didn't know, but assumed it must be as he had on an overcoat and hat and was neither a guest nor one of the servants. Joseph knew that the upholsterer was sending round a man to make an estimate on doing over the drawing-room sofa.

But it developed that the upholsterer's man hadn't come, and that Mrs. Meager the housekeeper, had, in fact, called him on the phone about it at one o'clock.

But Joseph could give no adequate description of the stranger. He had caught only a glimpse of his back, and became so confused, even as to the colour of the man's overcoat and hat, that we were left with the possibility that the entire figure was an invention of Joseph's overheated imagination.

"Look here," said Peel, when we emerged at last into the dreary street, "how about sending some one around to all the near-by telephone pay stations to see if

he can pick up something about that call. If the murderer phoned Jenkins, as the Clapps claim he did, it must have been from somewhere near by. By Henry Clapp's statement, it wasn't more than five minutes between the phone call and his arrival at the Sutter house."

"Radnor's apartment isn't three blocks away," said Bullitt.

Peel grinned patiently.

"I see what you mean," he said.

"You're hard to please, Inspector. Clapp didn't do it and Radnor didn't do it, yet we've got a pretty good case against both of them. And here you go trying to scare up some mythical third party that we can't prove exists."

"There was a third person present," insisted Peel stubbornly. "Joseph saw him."

"Yeah!" said Bullitt. "And he might have had a dark blue overcoat and a derby hat, or he might have had a light gray overcoat and a dark cap."

Peel sighed.

"There's a lot in what you say, Sergeant," he admitted. "But you've got me wrong. I don't say Clapp didn't do it."

"After all," Bullitt pointed out, "you coached him pretty closely on that story of his."

Peel grinned in that annoying way he has and his eyes sparkled as he looked at the sergeant.

"So I did," he admitted. "An error, for which I apologise. And I don't say," he went on, "that Radnor isn't guilty." He ran a worried hand over his hair. "He could be. But if he did it why in heaven's name should he leave his gun behind as a visiting card?"

"Because," said Bullitt with good-humoured exasperation, "he was trying to make you think just what you're thinking—that he's being framed."

Peel threw up his hands.

"And you complain I have too much imagination. In my wildest flights I never equalled that one. You stick to your facts."

"I intend to," said Bullitt grimly. "But if it will make you any happier, I'll have those phone booths checked."

We left Bullitt and drove down to the Baltimore Midtown Bank, in search of Mr. Winslow Thompson. The Midtown was not a big bank, but a very solid and respectable affair run on safe and conservative lines and boasted among its clients some of the most respected names in Baltimore.

It was housed in a handsome old building on Charles Street and had been there for many years, having resisted the temptation to larger and more expensive quarters which beset so many banks during the era of Coolidge prosperity. Its impressive expanses of marble and bronze had an air of elderly dignity and decorum, a little faded but the very acme of respectability.

I had never seen Winslow Thompson in his own setting before, and I saw at once that I had done him less than justice.

This office was, so to speak, his native goldfish globe. Away from it he was a fish out of water.

And, as a matter of fact, it was not unlike a goldfish bowl. The walls of glistening mahogany to a height of perhaps three feet, were otherwise of glistening glass, polished and immaculate. Sitting at his glass-topped desk, he could survey the full extent of his domain, and was himself in full view. As we entered the bank, I saw him at once. Sutter was with him and they appeared to be in earnest consultation.

I looked about me. To the right was the usual row of tellers' windows, framed in a bronze grill, with the usual row of suave-looking young men behind the grill. At the end, behind a small card bearing the neatly lettered

words: "Lawrence Vincent, Cashier," I saw our acquaintance of the night before. He glanced up and evidently recognised us. I thought he looked at Peel with a slightly worried air. But Peel was approaching a little man who was standing unobtrusively near the desk provided for the making out of cheques and deposit slips. Although he was in plain clothes, he wore the unmistakable signs of a guardian of the law. Peel beckoned to me and when I joined them he introduced Stander, the bank detective.

"We want to have a private word with Mr. Thompson," Peel told him.

"Why certainly. Just a moment."

He went across to Thompson's office and a moment later held the door for us.

Sutter rose as we entered.

"I've just been talking to my nephew over the phone," he said, "Don't tell me you've really got any kind of a case against him!"

"We have decided to hold the matter in abeyance for a time," said Peel non-committally.

Winslow Thompson leaned back in his chair and looked gravely at Peel.

"I hope you realise the seriousness of our position, Inspector. Any rumour—any breath of publicity given to the matter—God knows what might happen. The bank might suffer heavily."

"There will be no publicity," said Peel, "unless Clapp himself starts it."

"And you aren't going any farther in that direction?" asked Sutter.

"Not at the moment."

Sutter laughed uncertainly.

"Well, I suppose I will have to be content with that. I'll be in my office if you want me."

He went out and closed the door. Winslow Thompson looked at Peel.

"You want to see me—about what?"

I was busy revising my estimate of the man. He had always seemed such a windbag. But the impression he gave now was of quiet, assured competence. I think Peel shared my surprise. For a moment he studied Thompson appraisingly.

Then he said:

"I understand Jenkins telephoned you at the club on Saturday. Have you any idea what he wanted to see you about?"

"Not at all. As you doubtless know, he came into the club later when I was there, but he made no effort to speak to me. Whatever it was, I imagine the matter was of little importance."

"Have you seen him since then?"

"I saw him again at the club on Saturday night. I gave a talk on Soviet Russia. He was there. We exchanged a few words, I believe. Nothing special."

"You saw the quarrel between Jenkins and Philip Radnor?"

"I did."

"Is it your impression that Radnor was serious in his threat against Jenkins?"

"My dear Inspector, I thought that impressions were outlawed in a court of law," said Thompson with a half-smile.

"This isn't a court of law," Peel reminded him. "I am asking you what you thought."

"Well——" Thompson considered. "Radnor was certainly very angry. On the other hand, people who make threats like that don't usually carry them out."

Peel nodded.

"Would it surprise you to hear that this particular threat was carried out?"

"Yes," said Winslow Thompson, "it would surprise me. Of course, if you could discover sufficient motive——"

"That's what we're after," said Peel. "Motive!"

"Ah, well, I can't help you there."

Peel stared thoughtfully through half-closed eyes at nothing.

"There seems to be quite a lot of people who would be glad to get Jenkins out of the way. People he had been—bothering."

"I can easily believe it," said Thompson dryly.

"He never—bothered you?"

Thompson sat up, frowning irritably.

"He annoyed me extremely, Mr. Peel. He was a constant source of embarrassment and irritation. I have regretted a hundred times that I introduced him into the club. And now if you'll excuse me——"

"One more question, if you please, Mr. Thompson. Where were you yesterday between, say, twelve-thirty and one o'clock?"

Thompson looked sharply at Peel. I fancied he was considerably startled.

"Well, really, Inspector——"

"A formality," said Peel smoothly.

Thompson considered a moment.

"I had an appointment with my tailor at twelve-thirty. I intended to take a cab. I hadn't used my own car coming into town in the morning because I dislike driving in bad weather. About twelve o'clock I told my secretary to call up and order me a taxi. She tried half a dozen companies but their cabs were all engaged and they couldn't promise one under an hour. So at quarter-past twelve I left the bank, thinking I might be able to pick up a cruising cab on Charles Street. But I didn't. They were all full, and such street cars as came along were crowded. So I walked. I rather en-

joyed it, after all. But it took me some time. It must have been one o'clock when I got to the tailor's."

"And your tailor is——"

"Herman Rouse."

Peel got to his feet.

"Thank you very much," he said smoothly. "I'd just like a word with your secretary——"

"Certainly." Thompson touched a bell and a moment later a pretty girl who had been typing in the next cubicle came in.

Thompson introduced her.

"This is Miss Rowe. She will answer any questions you care to ask."

The girl turned her bright brown eyes inquiringly on us.

"Mr. Thompson tells me you called a number of taxi companies yesterday, trying to get a cab. Can you tell me the names of the companies?"

She gave us a list without hesitation and Peel jotted them down.

"Thank you. It would be helpful if you could tell us about what time you called."

"I began about twelve, I believe. It took me perhaps five minutes to call them all."

"Thank you," said Peel. "And you waited in the bank until Mr. Thompson came back?"

"No, sir. I went around the corner and had my lunch. But I'd been back some time when Mr. Thompson came in—nearly half-past one, I think." She glanced at her employer, who nodded.

"I was here for only a moment," he told Peel. "I had to give some instructions about a conference yesterday afternoon. Then I went round to Clancy's and met you."

Peel slipped the list into his pocket.

"Perhaps Miss Rowe would be kind enough to take us round to Mr. Sutter. I'd like just a word——"

She took us to Sutter's cubicle. Sutter had a paper package on his desk. He opened it and showed it to us. Half-a-dozen pairs of black kid gloves, with the sales check tucked into the string. Peel slipped the check into his billfold and we made our adieux, separating fondly from Mr. Stander on the sidewalk. It was evident that the little detective was bursting with curiosity, but Peel did not enlighten him.

We drove down to Clancy's. The morning had gone and lunch seemed in order. But we were not destined to lunch just yet. Clancy met us with a message.

"A Mr. Harper called from New York," he told Peel, "and left a number. He said you could get him there until one."

Peel glanced at the clock and went into the telephone booth. Clancy looked at me, his cheerful moon-face brimmed with curiosity.

"Interesting case, Mr. Aiken."

"Very," I said non-committally.

"Making any progress, may I ask, sir?"

"Sergeant Bullitt," I said sententiously, "has the affair well in hand."

"But—but Inspector Peel, sir——"

"Now, Clancy," I said sternly, "be yourself. You know Peel always knows all about everything. If he wanted he could go out and grab the murderer right away. But he doesn't want to. He's queer that way. He likes to see what they'll do next."

Clancy winked and grinned.

"I was just asking. I heard something last night I thought might interest him."

I pricked up my ears. It would not be the first time that help had come from Clancy. All the gossip in town seemed to gravitate to his bar.

"Let's have it," I said.

Clancy dropped his voice to a conspiratorial rumble.

"Last night they was a lot of people in here and most of them was talking about the murder. And one feller—he was standing by the bar with two-three others. A middle-aged man, a good dresser. And he said he didn't know but what he ought to go round and tell the police something he saw yesterday. But he saw by the papers how they were pestered to death by cranks handing in phoney information every time a crime is committed. And anyway he supposed this couldn't have anything to do with it."

"Well," I said, "what was it?"

"He's manager in a drug store round on Cathedral Street, near where the lane comes out that runs back of the Clapp house. And yesterday morning when he went to work he parked his car right across the street from the lane. Round one o'clock he was going downtown on some business and he got in his car and tried to start it and it wouldn't start. He says he told the garage man to change the battery but he supposed the feller forgot. Anyway the thing wouldn't even murmur."

"And while he was sitting there cussing he saw a feller come out of the lane and sort of look around quick and go off down the street. Didn't think anything of it except they wasn't much chance he'd find a taxi, weather like that. But afterwards he got to wondering whether the feller *was* looking for a taxi. And then he got to thinking he'd seen that man before."

I will confess that chills—chills of excitement—were chasing up my spine.

"Where'd he seen him?"

"Well," said Clancy, "he was pretty sure it was a feller that had come in the drug-store half an hour or so before and made a call on the pay telephone."

"Could he identify him?"

"I asked him that question myself," said Clancy. "He said he never got a good look at him. He was back in the prescription department with the clerk when the feller came in. He came out when he heard the door open, but by that time the man was in the booth, and he only saw his back going out. But he was pretty sure it was the same guy. Had on a brown overcoat and a light grey fedora."

"Did you get this druggist's name?"

"Sure," said Clancy. "He gave me his card." And from his vest pocket he took out a square of pasteboard and gave it to me:

SYDNEY J. LEMMON

Toilet Accessories

Drugs

Soda

I could hardly wait to acquaint Peel with my find, but when, a few minutes later, he joined me in the restaurant, his face was so bleak with bad tidings that, for the moment, even Mr. Sydney J. Lemmon was banished from my thoughts.

"Here's a pretty mess," he said, sitting down heavily. "Good God, how Bullitt will crow. And Violet," he added ruefully, "is going to cry and say it is all my fault. And that," he finished with a sigh, "is something I cannot bear."

"What's the matter?" I asked with a sinking heart.

"The matter," said Peel, "is that Philip Radnor's name isn't Philip Radnor, and that he got that job he had in New York before he came here with recommendations admittedly false."

"Admitted—by whom?"

"By the fellow that wrote them."

I was too stunned for a moment to make any comment.

"What," I managed to say at last, "is his real name?"

"Martin Boles. Does that strike any reminiscent chord, Jonas?"

I shook my head blankly, and yet—Peel traced circles on the tablecloth with his fork.

"It reminds me of something. I'm damned if I can think what."

"Suppose," I suggested, "you tell me all about it."

"Well, of course," said Peel, "the first thing I did yesterday was to wire Harper to find out all he could about Radnor's background. It was fairly obvious that there was more than met the eye—about that 'Madame Butterfly' letter, for one thing."

"You think it applies to Radnor?"

"Naturally. Why would Lucy Shanks be interested in Jenkins's oriental wives?"

"I don't know. But I thought——"

"You mean, my dear Jonas," said Peel, "that you did not think. But Violet saw it at once."

"You and Violet!" I exclaimed, annoyed. "So that's why she was so upset!"

"Anyway, it was obvious that Radnor was going to be in it up to the neck. And I wanted to know all I could about him. It was easy to find out what firm he worked for before he came here, so I wired Harper to get in touch with them. These people—the Acme Fuel Oil Company—had nothing but good to report of Mr. Radnor, but they knew nothing of his history, except that, they believed, he had recently returned from two years spent in the employ of the West Refining Company in China. They referred Harper to a Mr. Arthur Melrose, an official of that company, who had written a very glowing testimonial to Mr. Radnor's capacities and character when he applied for a position with the Acme people.

"Mr. Melrose, approached by Harper, seemed a little embarrassed, but he stuck to it that he had known Radnor for years—that they had gone to school together and that he had the highest regard for him. However, he soon got tangled up in his own story. Asked what school it was, he hedged. And when it was finally put up to him that Radnor was mixed up in a murder case, he lost his nerve. It seems that he and Radnor did go to school together, and college too. Were great buddies, in fact. Then they both got into the West Refining Company and did very well, but Melrose married a daughter of the president of the company, and did better. Finally Radnor—or rather Boles—went out to China to start a branch office selling kerosene to the Chinese or some such thing. And got into trouble. Melrose balked at that point. Wouldn't say what the trouble was. Said we could ask Boles if we wanted to know. He insisted it was nothing that could in any way reflect on Boles's character. According to Melrose, Boles resigned his job and travelled for a year. When he came back he went to see Melrose. He said he wanted to change his name and start over again and asked his old friend to help him. And—believe it or not—his old friend did."

"Of all crazy and preposterous things——"

"It's been done before," Peel reminded me. "But in this case I agree it's preposterous. It was so casually done—only a recommendation from Melrose and a new job in a new company, and then, as soon as the opportunity offered, a change down here. And it so nearly worked—that's the really incredible part."

"It doesn't suggest a sense of criminal guilt," I said.

"No," Peel agreed thoughtfully. "No. It suggests——" He broke off. "By Jove!" he said, and stared into space. "Publicity, of course—that would

be it. Some scandal—Jonas, what were the big scandals in the East in—say '29 to '30?"

"How would I know?"

"Marc White is the fellow we ought to have in on this."

But when he called the *Starpaper*, Marc White was out. He came back to the table fuming.

"Boles!" he said. "Boles! Now, what the hell do I associate with that name?"

CHAPTER XIV

Wednesday, December 13. 1 p.m.

WHILE we ate our lunch I told Peel Clancy's story of the druggist and the man he had seen coming out of the lane.

"As far as it goes it supports your theory of the crime," I said.

"As far as it goes," said Peel gloomily. "If he can't identify the fellow, it won't go far. I tell you, Jonas, this is the most exasperating case I've ever handled—the most tantalising. I know exactly what happened—I can follow the murderer in my mind's eye as clearly as if I'd watched him at work—and I haven't a shred of reliable proof—nothing that a lawyer wouldn't laugh out of court. This fellow is smart—so smart," he added softly, "that I wonder——"

"What?"

"I wonder if we've heard the last of him."

We went around to see Mr. Sydney J. Lemmon and found him cordial and very willing to be helpful. But it developed, as we anticipated, that there was not much he could do. By this time he was fully convinced

that the man he had seen emerge from the lane was the same man who had made a telephone call from the pay-booth in his store half an hour before.

"He walked the same way," he assured us eagerly.

But on being asked to describe the walk he could think of nothing definite. Unfortunately the man did not limp—had, it appeared, no distinguishing characteristics. Mr. Lemmon believed he was a middle-aged man and was prepared to swear that both the man whose back he had seen in the store, and the man who had emerged from the lane wore a dark brown coat and a light-grey fedora. He did not think he would be able to identify him if he saw him again.

"You see," explained Mr. Lemmon regretfully, "I only saw his face for a moment, and he was across the street, and it was snowing hard."

We agreed with Mr. Lemmon that identification would be difficult under those circumstances and took our departure, after fervent assurances from Mr. Lemmon that if he ever saw the dark brown overcoat and light-grey hat again he would instantly notify us.

We spent a wet and miserable hour scouring the neighbourhood for some one who might have seen the brown overcoat and the light-grey hat. And strangely enough we did succeed in tracing him as far as Howard and Monument Streets.

It seems that a horse drawing a milk wagon had fallen across the street from a little newspaper and candy store on the corner. The proprietor stood for several minutes watching the efforts of the milkman and a passing labourer to raise the frightened animal. And while he was watching, the man in the brown overcoat and grey hat came along Monument Street from Mt. Vernon Square. The proprietor of the store noticed him because he crossed the street to avoid passing the two men struggling with the horse, and then crossed back

again, which seemed a curious manoeuvre in such bad weather. He passed directly in front of the shop door, but beyond agreeing with Mr. Lemmon that the man was middle-aged and clean-shaven, the shopkeeper could offer nothing definite in the way of description.

"He was walking with his head down against the wind and his coat collar turned up," he told us. "I might know him if I saw him again, but I doubt it. I don't believe I could swear to it."

However, he did furnish us with one potentially useful bit of information. He said he believed the man had taken a street car going downtown.

"I can't be sure," he told us, "because I didn't actually see him get on the car, but the last I saw of him he was crossing over to that corner—over there where the car stops."

We thanked our informant, whose name, it developed, was Jacob Strauss, and continued our search, but we learned nothing further. At last Peel, to my infinite relief, climbed back into the car.

"We'll go to the offices of the United Railways," he said. "Certainly, if he got on a car, the conductor or motorman will have got a good look at him."

"You'll never find him," I said crossly. I was cold and wretched and in no mood for optimism.

Peel's teeth clicked together and he jammed his foot on the starter with an altogether unnecessary violence.

"I've got to find him," he said grimly. "I'll find him if it's the last thing I do." After a moment he added more lightly: "You'd better pray for me. Because, if I don't succeed, it's better than even betting your friend Philip Radnor will swing."

I shivered with something more than the cold that was slowly creeping up from my sodden shoes to my thighs. I was only too well aware of the truth of what he said.

The street-car people were courteously willing to be helpful. They took down the meagre description we were able to give of the man we were looking for and promised to question the operators on that route at about the time in question. They also agreed to post the description, on the chance that the man might have been seen on one of the other routes within walking distance of Mt. Vernon Square. And they promised to get in touch with Peel as soon as they had any information.

When we were once more out in the street Peel looked at his watch.

"It's four o'clock. I'm going round to the *Starpaper* to see Marc White. Want to come?" And he grinned at me.

He couldn't have persuaded me not to go, as he knew very well. I said nothing but climbed into the car.

Marc White had come in and was dashing off a lively concerto on his typewriter as we approached his desk. Seeing us, he pushed back the green eyeshade he affected and, with a lordly gesture, indicated chairs.

"A pleasure, my dear Inspector; a pleasure, I assure you."

Peel stood looking down at him absently, as though he hardly saw him.

"What are you doing for the next half-hour?" he asked.

Marc White jerked the paper from his typewriter and yelled for a copy boy. Then he leaned back at a perilous angle and hooked his thumbs in the armholes of his vest.

"Yours to command, Inspector."

"I want you to tell me a story," said Peel. "A Chinese story——"

"Once upon a time," began Marc White instantly, "there was a hero named Chan Huan and he killed a dragon."

"No," said Peel softly; "once upon a time there was an American named Martin Boles——"

Marc White sat up with a soundless whistle.

"Jumping Judas!" he murmured. "What has Martin Boles got to do with this affair?"

"Philip Radnor," said Peel slowly, "is Martin Boles."

"No!" For once Marc White was shaken out of his lazy impassivity. "No!" For a moment he seemed too astonished to go on. Then he got hold of himself. "Look here," he said, "do I get this—exclusive?"

"You can be as exclusive as you like," drawled Peel, "if you can tell me about Martin Boles."

"Can I? Boy, I made him up, to all intents and purposes. I created him. And to think"—he ran a frantic hand through his hair—"to think I never recognised him!"

"Even the best of us slip sometimes," said Peel dryly.

"But not often—not this time—God, what a story! Five-year vendetta ends in death of newspaper man. Pursuit around the world terminates in staid Mt. Vernon Square. Passion—revenge—gore—dollops of gore. What a tale!"

"Control yourself!" said Peel sternly. "You don't touch that typewriter till you've told me the whole story."

"I'll tell you, sweetheart, I'll tell you," cooed Marc White sweetly. "I'll tell the world."

The tale that he told us was fantastic enough, and as I heard it my heart sank swiftly, surely into my boots and began to get cold. For I realised that this was what Bullitt was looking for—motive. A motive so clear, so definite, so conclusive that it would hang Radnor as high as Haman. A motive that no amount

of fine-spun reasoning about misplaced firearms and a mysterious stranger in brown overcoat and grey hat could minimise or confute.

No doubt you will recall the episode, as I did as soon as White began to talk. It was spread over the front pages of practically every newspaper in the world—certainly every newspaper in America—in the spring of nineteen-twenty-nine.

Martin Boles, an engineer employed by the West Refining Company, had taken his young bride to China. They had gone to live for some months in a small town where there was already a European settlement: a couple of missionaries and a handful of traders.

The country about was peaceful enough, but in the hills, fifty miles away, a band of outlaw robbers still eluded capture. But they had never ventured down into the plain and no fear was felt of them.

One fine spring night, when Boles was off on a short business trip, the bandits came. The terrified servants fled and Mrs. Boles was cornered before she could escape. She was attacked and found hours later by her husband on his return, in a critical condition and half out of her mind with terror and shock.

He took her to the American hospital in Peking, and through the efforts of a friend of his in the legation, succeeded in having her name kept out of the affair. An attempt was made by the authorities to find and punish the perpetrators of the outrage, but without success, and for a few weeks the matter was allowed to lapse.

But just before Martin Boles and his wife sailed for home, the affair blazed up again. A newspaper man working for a scurrilous sheet published in Peking, traced to their source some of the rumours that were flying around, unearthed the story in all its horrible details, and his rag came out next day with a circumstantial

account, giving names and places, and howling for the blood of these ruffians who had insulted the American flag.

The name of Susan Boles was spread over the front pages of newspapers all over the world. The thing became a cause célèbre. There was a lot of irresponsible talk about war and the movements of the American fleet in the Pacific.

And Susan Boles, leaving her husband in the sitting-room of their suite in the hotel, where their luggage stood packed, ready to go aboard ship, took his revolver from his attaché-case and shot herself.

Martin Boles went berserk. He swore he would shoot on sight the man who was responsible for his wife's death. And that man—the newspaper man who had started the scandal into life—was Boyd Jenkins.

"Jenkins told me about it once, when he was drunk," Marc White told us. "He said Boles went to his hotel, looking for him, but the clerk tipped him off and he escaped down the servants' stairway. Jenkins went to Japan and afterwards to Honolulu, and Boles followed him. He trailed him for about six months and then he seemed to get tired of it, for Jenkins heard he'd sailed for home. After a while Jenkins came too. When he got back he made discreet inquiries but he was never able to find out what had happened to Boles. He'd disappeared—vanished."

So this was the explanation of that affair at the Haviland Street Club—the seriousness with which Radnor had taken a comparatively harmless incident.

"Do you think Jenkins knew that Martin Boles was in Baltimore?" asked Peel suddenly.

"I know he didn't—then," said Marc White. "But that was—oh, two months ago, anyway."

The telephone on the desk at Marc's elbow whirled shrilly. He picked up the receiver, and motioned to us

not to go. He spoke into it briefly, his eyes on Peel's face. Then he hung up the receiver.

"That's a friend of mine—over at headquarters," he said. "He tells me Bullitt has just arrested Martin Boles, alias Philip Radnor, for the wilful murder of Boyd Jenkins."

As we crossed the office, the rattle of White's typewriter, shrill and quick as machine-gun fire and potentially as dangerous, followed us.

"What are you going to do?" I asked Peel, as once more, for the hundredth time that day, we went out into the bitter fog.

"I'm going to find the man in the brown coat—if it's the last thing I do, I'll find him!"

CHAPTER XV

Thursday, December 14—January 22.

BUT he didn't. He had men combing the neighbourhood of Mt. Vernon Place, looking for some one who might have seen the brown-coated stranger, but they found out nothing but what we had already discovered.

Our investigations and the notices at the street-car company drew a blank. No such man had been observed at the time and place in question. Either he had never boarded a car, or he had done so unnoticed. At the corner of Howard and Monument Streets the trail ended.

Admitting defeat at last, Peel shifted his point of attack. He set a man on the trail of the brown overcoat itself. But strangely enough no man even remotely connected with the case seemed to have a taste for brown. Grey overcoats, blue overcoats, even black overcoats, but no brown. Except Larry Vincent. Larry Vincent

of the Midtown Bank wore a brown coat. Peel pondered the point with interest, but dismissed it at last for lack of any connecting link with the murder.

A check on the list of taxi companies furnished by Thompson's secretary confirmed her story beyond question. Winslow Thompson was a name too well known to escape the memories of the men who had received the calls. They had been extremely regretful, but there hadn't been a cab available in the city of Baltimore that day. Such horrible weather.

Herman Rouse, the tailor, likewise confirmed Mr. Thompson's story. Yes, there had been an appointment for twelve-thirty. But such weather! What could you expect? And it had been nearly one when Mr. Thompson came in. Quite exhausted and covered with snow. A fine man, Mr. Thompson. A valued patron. Mr. Rouse had himself driven him back to the bank.

So that was that!

Mr. Sutter's alibi struck an unexpected snag. The man who waited on him in the book department remembered perfectly his inquiry for the Hemingway book. Unfortunately they had not a copy left. Most unfortunate. Mr. Sutter was a good customer. He often visited the book department. The clerk was quite sure of the time. It must have been a few minutes after twelve. He had been out to an early lunch and had just come in.

But from that point on no one could be found who remembered seeing Mr. Sutter. The free exhibition of his photograph among employees produced no results. The departments he mentioned were carefully canvassed, without success.

The clerk whose number appeared on the sales check remembered making the sale and identified the picture of Mr. Sutter, but she was certain that the transaction had not taken place until one-thirty.

Cross-questioned on this point, she had grown indignant. Of course she was sure. She had gone out to lunch at twelve-thirty and had not gone on duty again until almost one-thirty. And that had been her first sale after lunch.

The store restaurant was investigated and the waitress found who had waited on Sutter. She could not swear to the time, but she was certain he hadn't been there more than a few minutes. He had had a sandwich and a cup of coffee, and had left at once.

Sutter, on being asked to explain himself, had been obviously embarrassed. He admitted that he had been wrong in his first statement. He had been unable to make up his mind before lunch, and had bought the gloves, for lack of any more satisfactory idea, on his way out of the store.

Peel put a question mark after his name.

After all, the mistake was a natural one. Or was it?

Peel turned his attention to the list of people given him by Bessie Kingsley—people who might have had access to her extraordinary pink and blue letter paper, but here again he drew a blank.

He began—actually—to grow thin and there was a curious, grim intentness in his face. He was cross and difficult and his usual good humour was noticeably absent. The case had got under his skin.

Violet was partly responsible for this. She went around looking like a broken flower, if you know what I mean, and Peel winced every time he looked at her. Yet he kept coming around. They would sit by the hour hashing the affair over and over, looking for some thread they had forgotten, some clue they had overlooked.

"Those letters," Violet would insist. "We've got to find out who wrote them."

"You're telling me!" Peel would exclaim gloomily.

"They were dropped in a pillar-box in a crowded part of town. There are fingerprints on them but none registered in our files—probably the mail man and post office clerks. The paper came from Bessie Kingsley's desk; but there's no earthly way of proving who took it. Or it could have been stolen by some employee of Funk and Howells. But there's no discoverable connection between any one there and anybody with any discoverable connection with the crime. And that paper was made specially for Mrs. Kingsley, and no one else. So there you are!"

"But who could have known about——"

And they would go at it again, hammer and tongs, until in sheer desperation I would retire to my study and shut the door.

And meanwhile Philip Radnor was indicted and held for trial without bail.

About six weeks after Radnor's arrest something happened that produced a wild flurry of excitement. I was called from the breakfast table by a telephone call from Peel. For once his voice shook—yes, positively shook with excitement.

"Jonas," he said, "I've had another one."

"Another what?" I asked coldly. "If you mean another fit, that's no news. You've been having them steadily for weeks."

"You blithering ass! I've had another letter."

"Letter?" I repeated stupidly. "You mean one of these pink——"

"Yes. If you don't believe me, come and see for yourself."

"I'll be there," I assured him, and rushed for my coat and hat.

When I arrived at his office he was dusting the letter with fingerprint powder. And it was unquestionably the same incredible pink stationery with the envelope

lined with baby blue. There were plenty of prints on the envelope but none at all on the paper folded inside.

"Gloves," said Peel. "That ought to suggest something to me, but it doesn't."

He dusted off the powder and pushed the letter across the desk. It was printed again in staggering capitals, but they staggered the other way, if you know what I mean.

The envelope was addressed to Mr. Winslow Thompson, Greenway. It bore a special delivery stamp. The message read:

LAWRENCE VINCENT HAS BOOKED A PASSAGE
ON THE SANTA ANA, MARSTON LINE, SAILING
FOR BUENOS AIRES ON FEBRUARY FIRST. IT
IS RESERVED IN THE NAME OF GERALD
SARGENT.

"Now I wonder," said Peel thoughtfully, "what's that all about?"

He glanced at his watch.

"Nine o'clock," he said. "I should think those lazy fellows at the Marston Line ought to be on deck." He reached for his telephone and gave a number.

A moment later he set it down and looked at me.

"There's a cabin reserved for Gerald Sargent, all right. Reserved by phone and the ticket called for and paid for by a Western Union messenger boy." He drummed with his fingers on the desk. "What do you know about Mr. Lawrence Vincent?"

"I've never seen him except that night at Bessie Kingsley's. But people seem to like him. His reputation is good as far as I know."

"Then why was he at Bessie Kingsley's?"

"Well," I said uncomfortably, "I have heard that he likes the ladies a little more than is discreet for a

man in his position. And he drinks—more or less. But he's supposed to be above criticism, professionally. And really a very decent fellow all round."

Peel cocked a non-committal eyebrow at me.

"That's what Mr. Winslow Thompson said when he hauled me out of bed two hours ago to read the letter. But unless I'm mistaken," said Peel grimly, "he's very disturbed, for all his reassuring language. Got any money in the Midtown?"

"No," I said, "but Violet has."

"Call her up and tell her to take it out—pronto."

I did so. When I had finished Peel went on:

"Winslow Thompson said he'd send Stander out to check up on Vincent. He also agreed to have him get in touch with me. Jonas," Peel looked at me and I was startled by the burning intensity in his eyes, "I'll take a long shot. I'll bet you ten bucks to one that Vincent has already flown the coop."

"I'll take you," I said. "The *Santa Ana* doesn't sail until the first, according to that letter. That's ten days. And he doesn't know you've been tipped off."

Peel never took his eyes from my face, but he wasn't looking at me. He was looking through me at something else.

"A wild idea came to me this morning," he said softly. "It's so doggoned crazy that damned if I don't think it's right." He took his watch out and laid it on the desk in front of him. "Where does Vincent live, Jonas?"

"Out in Roland Park somewhere."

"Then if Stander went right out——"

The telephone rang. Peel grabbed at the instrument.

"Hello—Stander—yes." He listened and I could see the glow in his eyes deepen. "Thanks. If you pick up anything, let me know."

He hung up and thrust the telephone from him, back

on the desk. He brought his right hand down on the blotter with a light, triumphant gesture.

"By God! I was right. Vincent went out last night about nine, and hasn't been heard of since."

"But, after all, that doesn't prove he's vamoosed. There are a lot of places he could have spent the night."

"Yes," agreed Peel, "but take it from me he didn't. Vincent's gone. He won't turn up again."

And Peel was right, as, I must admit, he is with depressing frequency. Although how he guessed it, and what was in the back of his mind about it, I did not know. He absolutely refused to discuss it.

"No, no, Jonas," he said when I pressed him. "Bullitt already thinks I am cuckoo. Can't have you driven to the same conclusion."

For a moment he stared at the gloomy grey square of the window. Then he got to his feet.

"Come on," he said. "I think it's time Bessie Kingsley did some talking."

She was still in bed when, having creaked dismally aloft in the ancient elevator, we rang at her apartment door and inquired for her from the trembling Mamie. We waited for what seemed a long time in a room which had the dreary, sluttish look of a place that has not been cleaned up after a party the night before. There were ashes over everything. The ash-trays were full of cigarette butts and burnt matches and soiled glasses stood around on the tables and on the floor beside chairs that were still grouped as people had sat in them the night before. I had an eerie feeling that they were still there, silent and invisible, watching and listening.

In her own good time Bessie Kingsley trailed in, clad in an inadequate pink negligee which was none too clean, her eyelashes sticky with mascara, and her mouth a hard, scarlet bow. She said nothing—just stood and

stared at us with a wooden, sombre face. Peel came discreetly to the point.

"Mrs. Kingsley, what do you know about the disappearance of Larry Vincent?"

She crossed the room, took a cigarette from a box, and lighted it.

"Not a damn thing."

"But you knew he had disappeared."

"I know it now," she said, and stared at him. Her stare swung slowly to me and then back to Peel again.

Her face presented an extraordinary effect of immobility: as though the muscles were paralysed. Only her eyes moved and her mouth when she talked. Her really striking expressiveness was latent, implied, a matter of line, of the superb poise and assurance of her magnificent body. It was as though she said: "Here I am—an enigma. Make what you can of me."

"When did you last see Larry Vincent?"

"Night before last. He played bridge here until about midnight."

"And then?"

"If it's any of your business, he stuck around and talked."

"Alone?"

"Why not?"

"No reason," said Peel smoothly. "You know him well?"

She drew at her cigarette and exhaled the smoke slowly. Everything she did was slow.

"I knew him," she said flatly.

"What did you talk about?"

She seemed to give the matter careful consideration.

"We talked about what a foul climate Baltimore has. Then he spent about half an hour complaining about a dog that kept him awake all the night before, barking.

And I think that was the time he told me the real secret about how to make fish-house punch."

"Did he say anything about a plan to go to Buenos Aires?"

"No."

"Or anywhere else?"

"No."

"You did not know that he was sailing for Buenos Aires on February first?"

"I know he wasn't sailing on February first."

"How do you know that?"

"Because he invited me to go to dinner with him on February third, and go to that musical show that's going to be here that week. I forget the name but it's got that guy that plays the drum in it—that one that's so swell."

"Did he suggest the date?"

"Yes."

"And you're sure it was the third?"

"I've got it in a book."

She went across to another desk—a modernistic affair of shiny metal and grained wood—and flipped open an engagement calendar. Peel followed her and read it over her shoulder. Then he picked it up coolly and began to turn the pages.

"You have a nerve," she said. But she made no effort to stop him.

"Have you any of that pink writing-paper here?" Peel asked.

"Yes." She pulled open a drawer. Peel nodded and she closed it again. "Why do you ask?"

"Just curious. You see, I've had another letter—and I think you wrote it."

"I didn't."

"I think you remembered about the other letters and when this came up you thought it would be a good idea

to use the same paper and fool me. Because you knew that I knew you didn't write the others."

"I haven't written you any letters."

"Not to me—to Winslow Thompson."

He was watching her very closely and so was I, but if she was shaken she did not show it.

"I didn't write any letter to him either."

"Will you print something for me, Mrs. Kingsley?"

"Sure." She sat down at the desk and took up a pencil.

"The pen, please," said Peel.

She looked up at him briefly, and then, without a word, took up the pen.

"Please print as follows," Peel said: "Lawrence Vincent has booked a passage on the *Santa Ana* sailing for Buenos Aires on February first. It is reserved in the name of Gerald Sargent."

When she had finished Peel took the paper and slipped it into his pocket, merely saying: "Well, we won't bother you any more just now."

"It's a pleasure," she said on her usual flat note. "No bother at all."

When the door was shut after us Peel looked down the elevator shaft and then up. The cage was up at the top floor apparently, and the elevator man's voice could be heard talking to some one. Peel left me, running down the steps two at a time. A moment later, listening intently, I thought I heard his voice and guessed he was using the switchboard phone downstairs. I waited and when the elevator came down I stopped it and got in. The elevator man looked at me curiously but said nothing. When we reached the ground floor Peel was standing inside the front door. I joined him but he made no move to go. The elevator man goggled at us but made no comment. He returned to his switch-

board and his copy of *True Heart Throbs*. He opened it and watched us over the top.

Five minutes later an unobtrusive little man with his coat collar turned up over an unobtrusive muffler pushed open the door and came in. He glanced at us without any sign of recognition. Peel went out and I followed him. The little man was Murphy from headquarters.

Peel offered no explanation for his manœuvres and I asked for none. We got back into his car and he drove out to Roland Park.

CHAPTER XVI

Monday, January 22. 11 p.m.

WE found Vincent's house, grey-shingled, on an old street lined with handsome trees. The house was well placed, in a big yard. In summer it must have been charming, but on this grey January day, with the leafless shrubbery shivering in an icy wind, it was bleak enough.

When we rang, the door was opened by a little tow-headed boy of seven or eight. He looked us up and down gravely and then he said:

"I guess you can come in."

He shut the door after us and stood regarding us with eyes in which curiosity struggled with dignity. The curiosity won.

"Are you the police?" he asked. "The man who was here said the police would come."

"Not exactly," said Peel, smiling. "I'm a post office inspector. I've come to see about a letter."

"Oh!" The child's face fell. "I thought you were a detective."

"Well, I am," said Peel. "A kind of detective."

The boy brightened again. Eagerness shone in his face.

"The kind that makes fingerprints?"

"Yes. Look here. I'll show you something." He took the pink envelope from his pocket. "I took some fingerprints on that this morning. The powder's mostly rubbed off, but you can see a little bit."

The boy stared at it.

"Ever see paper like that before?"

He shook his head.

"Gee!" It was a long, rapturous breath. "I never saw a real detective before."

He was a nice-looking little fellow with a straight back and a candid, straight look in his grey eyes. The sort of look that always makes me think what a decent race we would be if we could keep the qualities we have as little children.

"I'd like to see your mother," said Peel gently. "Will you tell her?"

The child's face contracted.

"My mother's dead," he said in a matter-of-fact voice.

"Oh," said Peel, "I'm sorry. I didn't know that."

"You see"—the boy spoke easily, equal to equal, trying to help Peel out—"you see, she said she was going to come back from the hospital, but she couldn't. You see, she died. And my Aunt Em says when you're dead you can't walk."

"Is your Aunt Em upstairs?" Peel asked.

"Yes. But I don't know if she'll come down. She's been crying."

Peel took a card from his pocket.

"Give her this, will you? And tell her it's important."

When the boy had gone, Peel wiped his forehead

board and his copy of *True Heart Throbs*. He opened it and watched us over the top.

Five minutes later an unobtrusive little man with his coat collar turned up over an unobtrusive muffler pushed open the door and came in. He glanced at us without any sign of recognition. Peel went out and I followed him. The little man was Murphy from headquarters.

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"Are you the police?" he asked. "The man who was here said the police would come."

"Not exactly," said Peel, smiling. "I'm a post office inspector. I've come to see about a letter."

"Oh!" The child's face fell. "I thought you were a detective."

I tell you it wasn't just a job to him. He loved it like his own flesh and blood."

Miss Vincent smiled wryly.

"No, no, Inspector Peel, if you suspect anything wrong at the bank, you're mistaken. He would no more have touched a penny that didn't belong to him than he'd have cut his son's throat. And that's the truth."

Truth or not, she believed it. That was clear.

"But you've said he's not been himself recently."

Miss Vincent twisted her hands together. I thought she was on the point of saying something and changed her mind.

"He's been restless," she admitted. "But that began when Miriam died. It's been as if he was trying to distract himself—to forget."

"Now about last night," said Peel. "Tell me exactly what happened."

"We had dinner as usual at seven. Lawrence sat around reading the evening paper until about nine o'clock. Then he went out. He said he'd probably be late."

"Say where he was going?"

"No."

"Did he seem much as usual?"

Miss Vincent hesitated. She looked doubtfully at Peel.

"He was certainly just as usual at dinner—in very good spirits, I thought. Larry came in and sat with us and they were joking back and forth. Then Larry went to bed and we sat in the living-room."

"I was sewing, and Lawrence, as I said, was reading the paper. After a while he threw it down and turned on the radio. We chatted and I was delighted to find him so cheerful."

She broke off, her forehead wrinkled perplexedly.

"I've been over and over it, Inspector," she said, "trying to think of something that might help."

"And you—succeeded?"

"I don't know. I thought nothing of it at the time, but—it *was* queer. I had quite the impression that Lawrence meant to stay at home last night. For one thing, he'd put on his slippers, as he does occasionally when he's tired and expects to stay at home. And then—that telephone call."

"What telephone call?" asked Peel softly.

"About half-past eight the phone rang and Lawrence answered it. It's out in the hall and, as I said, the radio was turned on, so I didn't hear the conversation. I could hear his voice, but the words were confused, and anyway I wasn't paying attention."

"When he rang off I spoke to him to ask who it was, but he didn't answer, so I supposed he'd gone upstairs. When he came down he had his shoes on and said he was going out. A fellow was going to stop for him at nine."

Miss Vincent's eyes filled.

"I wish I'd asked him who it was, but I didn't. I thought he'd have told me if he wanted me to know, so I didn't ask."

"Did you connect the phone call with his decision to go out?"

"I suppose so. I really didn't think. I was listening to the radio programme and intent on my sewing, and only half paying attention."

"Did he seem disturbed while he was waiting?"

"Well, he kept walking around—looking out the window—that sort of thing."

"And then what happened?"

"An automobile horn blew outside and he took his hat and said good-night and went out."

"And you haven't heard from him since?"

"No."

And that was all. Peel's most skilful questioning elicited nothing further.

We talked to the maid, and to Lawrence, Jr., but neither of them remembered the telephone ringing at all that evening. Apparently Lena had gone home and Larry had fallen asleep before the call came through.

As we were leaving Emily Vincent looked at Peel with tearful eyes.

"Please, Inspector, please do what you can to quash these rumours about the bank. There can't be anything in them, and it will kill Lawrence when he comes back to know he's been suspected."

But Lawrence Vincent did not come back and the rumours proved to be only too well-founded. The directors got auditors in at once and that afternoon the bank's doors closed and did not re-open.

There seemed to be little doubt of the facts. Vincent had falsified the books to the tune of half a million dollars and had decamped with the cash. He had evidently intended to sail for South America on the first of February, but some one had tipped him off that his intention was known and Vincent, realising that the jig was up, had disappeared.

Curiously enough he had taken nothing with him—not so much as a tooth-brush, as far as could be discovered. But he might have had an outfit ready somewhere in case of emergencies.

His description was circulated and the railway stations and airports and the ships in the harbour were canvassed without results. No one had noticed the car that had drawn up in front of the Roland Park house that dark January night. As far as could be discovered, Lawrence Vincent had walked out the front door and vanished into thin air. And half a million dollars had vanished with him.

It was all so self-evident that Peel's perversity in refusing to accept the foregone conclusion irritated me extremely. I had followed him in the matter of the Jenkins murder because—I admit it—all my instincts urged me to clear Philip Radnor at any price. But this was too much.

"It all dovetails perfectly," I urged on one of the many occasions when we discussed the case. "I don't see that there's a weakness anywhere."

"Who wrote that letter?"

"My dear Peel!" I got up and stamped angrily up and down the room. "Bessie Kingsley wrote it."

"She's out. Her printing is quite different."

"Disguised."

"Hanson says not."

"Some one might have overheard him making the reservations."

Peel shrugged.

"Of course it's possible. Oh, I dare say you're right, Jonas, and I haven't a leg to stand on. But will you explain to me what conceivable connection there can be between the Jenkins murder and this affair?"

"Why must there be a connection?"

"Bullitt says there isn't," said Peel grimly.

"For once," I murmured, "I suggest that Bullitt is right."

Peel walked the length of the room and back. Then suddenly he stopped and pounded his fist on my desk.

"No! No, he's not right. I've got three little cards that say he's guessed wrong. Three pink envelopes with blue linings!"

But I am getting ahead of my story.

The day Vincent disappeared was a busy one for us. When we left Vincent's house we drove down to the offices of the Marston line. We had no difficulty in confirming the purchase of the ticket in the name of

Gerald Sargent. The reservation had been made by phone on the fifteenth, and on the following day a Western Union messenger boy had come, had paid for the ticket in cash and had signed a receipt.

"Have you the receipt?" Peel demanded.

The clerk produced it. Peel pocketed it grimly and we went away.

The Western Union office was our next port of call. Inquiry revealed that the boy whose name appeared on the receipt was employed in a branch office on Eutaw Street. We drove around there and by good luck found him in.

His name was Jim Smith, and he was a bright-looking boy of about sixteen, with red hair and green eyes, and thin as a rail. The manager called him over from a bench against the wall, where he was surreptitiously reading *Real Detective Cases* behind a newspaper. I caught a glimpse of it as he thrust it hastily behind the bench.

He was clearly thrilled to the core to be questioned in the investigation of a real crime, although I think he was a little disappointed when he found it wasn't murder.

He remembered the incident of the ticket perfectly. He had been summoned about ten o'clock in the morning and told to go round to the Drake Hotel and ask for a Mr. Gerald Sargent. The Drake Hotel was a decent but cheap hostelry chiefly patronised by the humbler sort of travelling salesman. He had done as he was bid and had been sent up to room 401.

Here he was interviewed by Mr. Sargent, who had given him money and instructions.

"He said he was sick," the boy explained, "and couldn't go himself. And he looked sick too. He was in bed with a big muffler wound around his neck and

he was shivering and he was so hoarse he could hardly talk."

"Would you know him again?" asked Peel.

Jim Smith looked doubtful.

"I—I guess so," he said, "but he had the shades drawn down so it was real dark. And he had a false moustache on."

"A what?" Peel sat up sharply.

"A false moustache, sir. One of those things the kids use on Hallowe'en. I guess he thought he'd fool me in the dark," said Jim Smith proudly, "but I spotted it right away."

For a moment Peel sat perfectly still, unwinking. Then he said:

"What did he look like—barring the moustache?"

"He had dark hair, sir, but I think it was a wig. I wouldn't be sure about that."

"Age?"

"Oh, he was real old, I should think—forty-five or fifty."

I felt a little chilled.

"Height?" asked Peel. "Fat or thin?"

"I couldn't tell, sir," said the boy with evident distress. "He had the covers pulled up to his chin. But his face wasn't fat and I saw his hands. He gave me the money, you see. And they were thin hands and small—small as a woman's, sir."

"Good boy! I think you've done the trick for me." Peel got to his feet, his eyes glowing, although what this information had conveyed to him I could not see. He took a photograph of Lawrence Vincent from his pocket and showed it to Jim Smith. "Is that the fellow?"

Smith examined it carefully. He put his hand over the blond hair and studied the face.

"It could be," he said doubtfully. "With a dark wig and a moustache, it could be."

"Do you think it is?"

"No, sir, I don't."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. The eyes——"

Peel took back the photograph and did something with a pencil that drew the eyes nearer together. He gave it back to the boy.

"That better?"

"That's it," said Jim Smith excitedly, and he looked at Peel with eager admiration.

Peel erased the marks and slipped the picture back in his pocket.

He smiled into the excited face.

"Very few people notice hands," he said. "Why do you?"

Jim Smith flushed. After an instant's hesitation he pulled off a glove which he wore on his left hand. The two last fingers were missing.

"I see," said Peel kindly. "Well, you keep on noticing things. It may do you a bit of good some day." He slipped a folded bill into the boy's hand. "Come to Clancy's, and ask for me some time in the spring," he said in farewell. "I'll have some baseball passes for you. And if you think of anything else that might be useful, let me know."

"You bet, sir," said Jim Smith with a look of rapture on his thin face.

We went around to the Drake Hotel and approached the clerk at the desk.

Certainly, he recalled Mr. Gerald Sargent. He turned over the pages of the hotel register and pointed to a name, scrawled awkwardly in backhand, with the usual spluttery hotel pen.

Mr. Sargent had come in on the morning of the six-

teenth and had taken a room, saying he would want it only for one night. He had paid in advance. He had had only one small bag, which he carried himself. He had asked to have a district messenger boy summoned at once and sent up to his room. This had been done. And the boy had returned an hour later. Soon afterwards Mr. Sargent had come downstairs, explained that his plans had changed and he would be checking out immediately. He made no effort to reclaim any part of the money he had paid for the room. He had simply handed in his key and left. He had not asked for a taxi.

The clerk was unwilling to admit that there was anything queer about Mr. Sargent. He seemed to feel that it would reflect on the character of the hotel. But when it was discreetly hinted to him that we were on the track of a cashier who had vanished from the Baltimore Midtown Bank, he became unexpectedly communicative. He had money in the bank and would evidently have enjoyed throttling Mr. Vincent with his own hands.

He admitted that there was certainly something phoney about Mr. Gerald Sargent. He offered no opinion about the wig, but he was sure the moustache was a fake. He had hesitated about letting the fellow have a room, but Mr. Sargent, perhaps noting the hesitation, had taken out a fat billfold to pay in advance. And the clerk had been tempted. Times, after all, were very bad, and clients scarce.

He could not positively identify the picture of Mr. Lawrence Vincent, but he said that it was not unlike the man who had posed as Gerald Sargent, allowing, of course, for the differences in make-up. He placed Mr. Sargent's age at about forty-five and his height and weight as medium. He had not noticed his hands.

He was very willing to show us room 401, but, after all, it told us nothing. Nor were the servants on the

floor or the elevator man able to help us. Beyond agreeing with the clerk that the man in the photograph could be Mr. Gerald Sargent, the elevator boy could not help us. The other servants had not seen him at all. The Drake did not boast a doorman. There was no one to tell us where, when he left the hotel with his small black bag and his ticket to Buenos Aires, Mr. Gerald Sargent had gone.

"What's this business about the hands?" I asked curiously, when we got outside. "What does that prove?"

Peel stared for an instant thoughtfully down the windy street.

"Do you remember that evening we saw Vincent at Bessie Kingsley's?"

"Certainly," I said.

"What was he doing?"

I thought a moment.

"He was shaking up cocktails."

Peel nodded.

"You don't notice hands, Jonas," he said. "I doubt if you even know that your own are short and wide—or even that your fingers are square across the ends."

I felt an impulse to pull off my gloves and look but I restrained it.

"Well?" I said huffily. "What of it?"

"I do notice hands. They're a hobby of mine. I got a good look at Vincent's that night. And they aren't thin and small as a woman's. They're square and a little puffy, and unusually large for a man of medium size."

I took Peel home for dinner that night, and after dinner Bullitt came in, looking a little haggard.

"Caught your man, Sergeant?" Peel asked cheerfully.

"No," Bullitt sighed. "He's been seen in Lansdowne, York, Havre de Grace, and Annapolis; not to speak of Newport News and Raleigh. But we haven't got him."

"And you won't, Sergeant," said Peel, helping himself to the Scotch.

Violet had gone upstairs, and we were alone in the dining-room.

"Why not? Why won't I catch him?" asked Bullitt with unwonted irritation.

"Figure it out for yourself," said Peel, smiling sweetly. "I've cast enough pearls before—members of Baltimore's finest."

"Still sore about the Jenkins case, eh?" Bullitt winked at me. "Well, I will have a little, thanks. Just a dash. You know," he went on, when the seltzer water had been added to his liking, "Radnor—or Boles, rather—has admitted the whole thing."

I sat up.

"Not confessed?"

"Oh, Lord, no! But this Chinese story and his attempts to shoot Jenkins out there. He admits the whole thing. He had to. We can produce witnesses. Of course, he says he gave up the notion of revenge after six months, but who'll believe that?"

"Who indeed?" said Peel gloomily.

"And he says the only reason he changed his name was to get away from the publicity."

"Why not?" I said. "That would be reason enough."

"Tell it to the marines," said Bullitt scornfully.

"I wish you would," said Peel, "but you won't. You'll tell it to the jury, if I can't stop you in time. And some day you'll be sorry you did it. And I hope to God it won't be too late."

Peel finished with such vehemence that Bullitt and I

were both startled. And a moment later he left the room and went upstairs to join Violet.

"I've never seen him like this, Mr. Aiken," said Bullitt uneasily. "Usually he can take it on the chin like any one."

"I'd give a lot to know what he thinks of this Vincent case," the sergeant went on uneasily. "What did he mean when he said we wouldn't find Vincent?"

"You can search me. He has some wild theory. He doesn't think it was Vincent who registered at the Drake as Gerald Sargent."

"Course it was Vincent. Vincent dolled up in a wig and moustache so he couldn't be identified."

"Peel says the fellow didn't have Vincent's hands."

I expected Bullitt to laugh, but he didn't. He scratched his head perplexedly.

"Well, I think he's nuts," he said at last. "How you going to prove that if you haven't got fingerprints? One hand's like another, ain't it?"

"Peel says not."

"If Gerald Sargent wasn't Lawrence Vincent, who the hell was he?"

"You guess awhile," I suggested.

The sergeant fiddled nervously with his glass.

"You know," he said in a voice lowered to a confidential pitch, "the inspector has such a damn fool habit of being right that it makes me nervous to have him the opposite side of the fence two cases running. What's he getting at?"

"He thinks there's some link between this case and the Jenkins case."

And then Bullitt did laugh. He leaned back in his chair and laughed till he was breathless.

"The thing's gone to his head," he gasped. "He's cuckoo, that's what he is—cuckoo!"

CHAPTER XVII

Monday, January 22—Tuesday, February 6.

THE failure of the Baltimore Midtown produced a local crisis of no mean dimensions. This bank had been highly regarded, and Winslow Thompson had been esteemed as a financial wizard. The crash was followed by a series of spectacular bankruptcies, and many old and respected Baltimore families lost everything they had.

Feeling ran pretty high, and Lawrence Vincent was reviled from Federal Hill to the farthest reaches of the Green Spring Valley. Meetings of indignant depositors demanded his head, and the police were excoriated for failing to find him.

Commissioner Mottram, exasperated by the constant attacks on his department, vented his displeasure on Bullitt, who passed it on to his subordinates. Efforts were redoubled, and the detective force wore itself down, investigating the hundreds of tips which came daily into headquarters.

But Peel's prophecy still held good. Vincent was not found.

Miss Emily Vincent reported the receipt of threatening letters and phone calls, and the detective set to watch the Vincent home, on the chance that Vincent might try to communicate with his sister, was reinforced by a police guard.

Bullitt was convinced that Emily Vincent knew more than she would tell and he arranged to have the house telephone wires tapped. But nothing of interest was discovered.

Nor was anything of interest reported by the men

who shadowed Bessie Kingsley and listened in on her phone calls.

For my own part I did not believe that Emily Vincent knew anything about the affair. I went out to the house with Peel, several days after our first visit—he wanted to find out what size glove Vincent wore—and one look at Miss Vincent's tragic face convinced me of the genuineness of her horror and incredulous surprise.

Even in the face of overwhelming proof, she still maintained her brother's innocence.

"He couldn't have done it, Mr. Peel," she insisted with tears in her eyes. "Surely, when you grow up with some one, when you know some one as well as I know Lawrence—he was meticulously honest in the big things and little things. I'll never believe he took that money."

Peel said nothing. His face in the cold winter daylight looked worn and tired.

"Sergeant Bullitt," Miss Vincent went on, "makes a great deal of his—his going to Mrs. Kingsley's and playing around with her crowd, but that didn't mean anything. He likes people. He gets on well with lots of different kinds. That was just amusement."

"Miss Vincent," said Peel gently, "I agree with you. I am sure your brother is innocent. I hope to prove it."

She stared at him incredulously as if she could not believe her ears.

"Oh!" she whispered. "Oh! God bless you for saying that!" And she burst into tears.

When we left the house we met young Larry in the yard. He was evidently coming home from school, for he carried a strap full of schoolbooks. He was a sorry sight. His nose was bleeding and his face dirty and blurred with tears. When he saw us he stopped and gulped down his sobs.

"Hullo!" he said. "Have you got a handkerchief?" Peel pulled a clean one from his pocket.

"Here," he said. "Let me help you."

"I can do it myself," said Larry. He mopped at his face, but only succeeded in increasing the havoc.

"What happened?" asked Peel.

"One of the boys said my father was a thief, and I socked him."

"Good fellow," said Peel. "You sock everybody who says that."

"Yes, sir."

Behind us we heard the door open and a low, distressed cry.

Larry returned the bloody handkerchief and swaggered up the walk. As we went away we heard him say loftily:

"Don't be silly, Aunt Em. I can take care of myself."

Peel said nothing. He was noticeably silent all the way downtown. But his face was grim.

For the next week Peel was like a man possessed. I could not make out what he was driving at. He was at the bank at all hours, harassing the men who were investigating the books, and prying into the private affairs of the bank officials and directors.

"But what are you after?" I demanded, one evening when he dropped in, exhausted, for a late dinner. "Surely it's as plain as the nose on your face that Vincent absconded with the cash."

"That's what they tell me," he agreed. "With the single disastrous exception of Larry Vincent, the Midtown appears to have been staffed by a bunch of noble citizens, *sans peur et sans reproche*. Edifying, if true."

"Isn't it true?"

"I don't think so," he said softly. "Not quite."

I waited impatiently for him to go on, but he didn't.

Three days passed before he gave me an inkling of what he was about.

For once my book was going swimmingly. I had had one of those exhilarating days which occasionally fall to the lot of a distracted writer to restore his waning faith and convince him, even if all too fleetingly, that God is really in his heaven and all is right with a generally exasperated world. I had rounded off my climax in a manner which gave me keen satisfaction and I had managed to slip in a tricky twist which would, I flattered myself, hold 'em.

I had just sat back with a contented grunt and lighted a cigarette when my desk telephone rang. I was not surprised to find Peel on the wire, for Moose would have plugged in my private phone for no one else under heaven. But what Peel had to say surprised me. He wanted to know if I had ever heard Winslow Thompson's speech about Russia.

"Yes," I said. "I've heard it. I got caught the first time he gave it."

"Didn't it sound familiar?"

"No. Why should it?"

"Because he got it out of a book. So Marc White says."

"Why didn't he say it before?"

"He likes his private joke," said Peel.

I said nothing for a moment. The idea was just beginning to sink in.

"Good Lord!" I said at last. "You mean Thompson never went to Russia?"

"Oh, he went all right," said Peel.

"Then what——"

"I don't know." He paused a moment and then added: "And there are one or two other things——"

"Look here," I said. "Thompson wouldn't be the first man who had cribbed something out of a book."

"Nor the last," agreed Peel amiably.

"And you can't make me believe——"

"I'm not trying to," he interrupted. "I don't believe it myself. But my mind is full of a wild surmise. I'm going to see him."

"Now?"

"Now. Meet me at the bank in fifteen minutes."

He hung up. For a moment I stared at the telephone discontentedly. I had a feeling that Peel was about to make a fool of himself. And then I remembered that he did not often make a fool of himself. I wondered what those "other things" might be. It was with growing excitement that I put on my hat and coat and got into my car.

The bank was closed, of course, to public business but Stander was waiting for us and took us in by the private entrance on the side street. Thompson was waiting for us in his office and greeted us with a courteous, if inquiring look.

The strain of the situation was evidently telling on him. He looked as if he were not sleeping well. But he was quite composed.

"How goes it, Inspector? Found out anything about that letter?"

This was carrying the war into the enemy's camp, but Peel seemed not to notice.

"We've located the notepaper, at any rate," he said.

"Indeed? And may I ask——"

"It was made especially for Bessie Kingsley and must have been stolen from her apartment."

Thompson's eyebrows went up.

"Then perhaps Mrs. Kingsley——"

"No. I think we've definitely ruled her out."

"Vincent went to her apartment a good deal, you know," objected Thompson.

"And so did George Sutter, didn't he?"

There was a definite little pause.

Then Thompson laid down the rule with which he had been toying and leaned back in his chair.

"Let me know what you have in mind, Inspector."

"I understand that Sutter—and Clapp, too—have been very hard hit this last year or so."

"So have we all," admitted Thompson with a wry smile.

"Quite," agreed Peel. "You don't think——"

"My dear Inspector, if either Sutter or Clapp had known that Vincent was planning a get-away, what possible reason could they have for not saying so directly? Why resort to an anonymous letter?"

Peel shrugged.

"I can't answer you," he admitted. "It's all very confused. I'm feeling my way."

Thompson said nothing. He looked searchingly at Peel.

"Sutter's on the board of the Emergency Hospital, isn't he?"

"Certainly."

"And does he handle the hospital funds and investments?"

"The funds—most of them—are on deposit here. I handle the investments myself—have done it for years."

"You're a trustee?"

"Yes."

"Then you'd know if any one tampered with the accounts?"

"I would know it if the hospital suffered any unexplained loss. But it's conceivable that the account might be temporarily jockeyed without my knowledge if the amount abstracted were afterwards returned, you understand. In fact, that seems to be what happened."

"But in order to make that good, the money was

transferred from the account of Saint Mary's Home for the Aged and Infirm."

Again there was a pregnant little pause. At last Thompson said:

"It's true George Sutter handles the investments for St. Mary's. But you must think me naïve, Inspector, if you expect me to believe that you made this appointment in order to ask me questions which you could have answered by the most cursory investigation of the books. I must ask you to come to the point."

There was a new look in Thompson's face and a new tone—a note of suppressed but authentic anger—in his voice.

Peel went on as if he had not spoken.

"And you direct the investments of the Scott Memorial Library and the Ferlinghaus Orphans' Home?"

"Certainly. And of a number of private individuals and trust funds as well."

"Quite. I would like you to repeat that none of these accounts could be tampered with, without your knowledge."

"Permanently tampered with," corrected Thompson icily. "If you consult the books, you will find that, although naturally they have all suffered heavy losses due to the collapse of the market, their accounts are absolutely in order."

Peel went off at a tangent.

"I understand," he said, "that the first false entries in the books date back to the fall of 1929?"

"That is so."

"Can you tell me whether Sutter—or Henry Clapp—had been playing the market that year?"

"Naturally—if by playing the market you mean making investments with the hope of profit."

"I meant," said Peel dryly, "something rather more spectacular than that."

"In that case," said Thompson stiffly, "you will have to ask them. I knew nothing about it, at any rate."

"And you?" asked Peel smoothly. "Did you play the market?"

Thompson grew white with rage. He waited a moment before he replied. Then he said, on a cold, level note:

"I have already placed my private records in the hands of the examiners. They speak for themselves."

"They do indeed," said Peel politely.

"Then why——"

"Sometimes people have private accounts," said Peel softly. "Nothing discreditable, you understand. I was wondering——"

"I have no such account."

There was a pause. Then Peel got to his feet.

"Ah, well," he said. "That's really all I wanted to know. I won't take up any more of your time. Thanks very much."

We went away, leaving Thompson staring after us, white with anger, the corner of his mouth twitching.

"And what do you think you got out of that?" I inquired, a bit acidly, when we got outside.

Peel's eyes wore a worried look. In the cold wintry light his face was drawn and haggard.

"God knows," he said. "I'm clutching at straws."

He left me, refusing an invitation to dinner, and for several days I did not see him.

Meanwhile the anger of the populace had not abated. As always in such cases, cranks flourished. For four nights running Winslow Thompson was roused at three o'clock in the morning by a telephone call. When he answered, some woman's voice—apparently the same voice each time—asked:

"Is this Mr. Winslow Thompson?"

On being assured that it was, she said—and on each of the four nights she repeated the words exactly:

"I just want to make sure you are sharing the sleeplessness that your criminal carelessness has brought to so many innocent people."

After the fourth night Thompson had a key switch installed which enabled him to disconnect his phone when he went to bed.

But this did not stop the threatening reproachful, or angry letters—many of them anonymous—that came in every mail to him and to other officials of the bank. Henry Clapp and George Sutter both received some. This phase of the matter was placed in Peel's hands and his subordinates were busy.

Sometimes they discovered the writers and sometimes they didn't. One man was arrested for using the mails to threaten, and two were committed to insane asylums as hopelessly crazy. This was all routine stuff. Beyond looking through the letters each day, Peel did not seem to be interested.

On the first of February the *Santa Ana* sailed but no Mr. Gerald Sargent presented himself and the state-room reserved for him was unclaimed.

The mystery of the three pink letters remained unsolved, and the fact preyed on Peel's mind. He would sit with them spread on the table in Clancy's back room, poring over them with absorbed, brooding attention. One day I went in and found him engaged in this depressing pastime, and Hanson, the little bald handwriting expert from headquarters, was with him. Hanson was extremely short-sighted and wore thick glasses through which he peered with a disarming, childlike helplessness, but he had the sharpest eye for forgery I have ever encountered.

As I came up to the table Peel was saying:

"You agree with me then?"

But I was not informed as to what the agreement was

about. When he saw me, Peel folded up the letters and put them in his pocket.

"Hello, Jonas!" he said cordially and I detected a distinct satisfaction in his manner. "*A la bonne heure!* We were just knocking off. Let's have a drink."

I looked at him suspiciously. Peel's French is execrable and he knows it, but in moments of triumph he flourishes his half-dozen phrases with wilful defiance.

Hanson rubbed his hands together. He was as pleased at the detection of a forgery as an expert surgeon is when confronted with a nice carcinoma of the lung.

"I believe I could prove your case for you, Inspector," he said. "Yes, I think you could safely leave it to me. That Spencerian S is very suggestive. Although, of course, with printing one cannot be too dogmatic. One does not know how much has been done deliberately to mislead."

"Quite," said Peel.

I looked from one to the other blankly.

"Maybe you know what you're talking about."

"You'd think," said Peel, looking at me with the sardonic amiability which is one of his most annoying characteristics, "that after observing my brilliant work for all these years, Jonas would have confidence in me. But he hasn't. I have to prove it to him all over again, every time."

"Don't be an ass!" I said irritably. And beckoning the waiter, I ordered three Martinis.

"Sherry for me," said Peel, oh, so gently reproving, his twinkling eyes on my no doubt furious face.

"Oh, go to hell!" I said. And I laughed.

We sat chatting for half an hour. Then Clancy came in and said Peel was wanted on the telephone. He came back after a moment with a curious look on his face.

"Violet's up to something," he told me. "She wants me to go round to your house at once."

The wintry dark had closed down when we said good-bye to Hanson and got into my car. There is something dramatic about that early dark, something sharply anticipatory. The early lights winking along the streets and blinds coming down. The sense of well-being that follows a late afternoon cocktail; the sense of expectation of one knows not what.

And to-night there was something else; the look in Peel's face: the look that said it was good to strain one's sinews, good to bruise one's wits on a problem that tested the faculties to the utmost. That that, after all, had meaning, significance.

We did not know that we were driving toward a climax; that every revolution of the wheels carried us nearer to the next phase of our inquiry. Yet I had a lifted sense of drama, one of those magic moments that are not easily forgotten.

My house was quiet when I opened the door although I could hear voices upstairs: quiet and comfortably light, and full of the warm charm that Violet weaves around her wherever she goes. We took off our coats and turned toward the stairs.

And then we saw it: a small black bag like a doctor's standing on the hall table.

Peel stared at it like a man shaken out of his wits. Then his hand closed over my arm with a bruising pressure.

"By God, Jonas, I've got it! Matilda Wren!"

CHAPTER XVII.

Tuesday, February 6. 5 p.m.

WHILE we stood there, paralysed with astonishment, Violet looked over the head of the stairs, and seeing us, ran quickly down. There was a look on her face that I recognised—a secret sparkle that she wears when she is very well pleased with herself indeed.

“Miss Wren forgot her bag,” she said with a deceptively casual air. “I’ll just take it up to her.”

“Look here, Violet,” I said. “What are you up to?”

“I’m going to have a finger wave and a facial massage and a manicure,” she announced calmly. “And you may both admire me at dinner. You’ll stay, of course,” she added to Peel.

“Since when have you taken to beauty treatments?” I demanded suspiciously. Ordinarily Violet scorns such things. But now she merely smiled at me.

“Oh, well, one has to begin sometime,” she said airily.

“Violet,” said Peel in a low tone, “Matilda Wren——”

“Hush!” said Violet glancing up the stairs. “It suddenly came to me. So I called up Bessie Kingsley and, believe it or not, Matilda Wren goes there to do her hair once a week.”

“My God!” said Peel piously; “What a woman!”

I took it that this was intended as a compliment for Violet.

“So I made an appointment with her to come here. I wanted to see what kind of person she really is.”

The glint in her eye suggested a plan more definite than that. Peel snapped into action.

"How long do these—er—beauty treatments take?"

"Oh, an hour and a half easily."

"That will be time," said Peel. "Don't let her get to the phone."

"I won't," said Violet with determination, and she went upstairs, carrying the bag.

Peel put his coat on again.

"You'd better stay here," he said.

"The hell I will."

"You may get into trouble. I'm going to bust the law wide open."

"It won't be the first time," I said grimly.

"Nor the last," he agreed.

He consulted the telephone book and then we went out again into the cold, clear dark.

Matilda Wren lived in a red-brick house that was one of a row of red-brick houses on Reade Street. Peel sat in the car studying it for a few moments. Then he drove around the corner and parked on St. Paul Street.

"It's a boarding-house or, anyway, a rooming house. With luck, we ought to be able to make it."

I looked at my watch uneasily.

"It's just time for the roomers to be coming home."

"We'll have to chance it."

We walked back and went up the front steps with at least apparent confidence. Peel peered for an instant through the curtained panes of the hall door. I glanced at the neat row of letter boxes.

"It's a converted house," I said. "Apartments."

He nodded and turned the door handle. The door opened and we went in.

"This is a bit of luck," Peel said in a low voice.

"What floor?"

"Third."

"Another bit of luck."

And so it turned out to be, for the third floor was the

top floor, and there was only one other apartment, reducing the chances of our getting caught to a minimum.

There was a neat business card tacked to one of the doors. It read:

MISS MATILDA WREN

Hairdressing

Beauty Specialist

Peel took a little steel instrument from his pocket and for a moment his fingers fumbled with the lock. Then the door opened and we went in and shut it behind us. In the darkness I could hear a bolt shot softly home. Then Peel fumbled his way across a dark room to the windows and pulled down the shades.

"All right," he said. "Turn on the light."

I fumbled about until I found a switch and pressed it up.

The apartment revealed to us by the bleak overhead light was small and neat and indescribably depressing. There was a stuffy little sitting-room with half-a-dozen horrible art photographs on the wall, a couch covered in blue denim and blue silk curtains in the windows. The chairs were of a Grand Rapids elegance that flourished between the era of Mission furniture and the over-stuffed variety now in vogue—chairs which no one can sit on without permanent curvature of spine and spirit. The whole effect was bare: not the reticence of graceful restraint but the meagreness of a poverty-stricken imagination.

Beyond the sitting-room was a bedroom as neat and empty as a hospital room, and beyond that a tiled bath.

After a rapid survey, Peel set to work with the economy of motion of a trained expert. The most obvious places first. The ugly little writing desk of cheap red imitation mahogany; the varnished bureau; the drawers

of the tapestry covered library table; these yielded nothing. The little bookcase, only partially filled with shabby romances of the Harold Bell Wright school, came next, and the closet in the bedroom sparsely hung with Miss Wren's meagre wardrobe.

On the shelf of the closet were two cardboard hat-boxes. Peel lifted them down and set them on the bed. One was empty. Clearly it was the repository of the hat Miss Wren was now wearing. The other contained what was no doubt her Sunday hat, carefully wrapped in tissue paper. Peel lifted it out. Underneath, spread flat in the bottom, lay at least two quires of Bessie Kingsley's pink letter paper, with matching envelopes.

Peel replaced the hat in the box and returned the boxes to the shelf, being careful to replace them exactly as he found them.

"So!" he said.

He completed his search swiftly. In a folded paper under the mattress he found six finely embroidered handkerchiefs, yellowed with age and behind a picture on the wall a piece of lace wrapped in blue paper. And that was all. We stood in the middle of the sitting-room and looked at each other.

"Let's get out," said Peel with a wry smile. "This is breaking my heart."

With a last glance to make sure that everything was as we had found it, we turned out the lights, pulled up the shades and listened at the door. Silence. Peel opened it quietly and we went out. A moment later we were on the sidewalk. We had seen no one. The whole episode had taken no more than half an hour.

When we got back to the house Miss Wren was still engaged in her mysterious rites. Peel sent me upstairs to investigate. I found them in Violet's dressing-room. Violet, with a towel round her shoulders and her hair done up in a net, looked at me inquiringly and I nodded.

Miss Wren, dressed in a white coat like a doctor's, that buttoned up to her neck, was painting Violet's fingernails with something that was shiny and pink. Suddenly aware of my presence she looked up and saw me in the mirror, and her hand jerked so that she daubed the pink stuff all over Violet's finger. She turned around and looked at me and then looked at Violet.

"Good-evening, Miss Wren," I said politely.

There was a noticeable pause before she returned my greeting, and went back to her work, scrubbing away at the mess she had made, with a piece of cotton. I went downstairs again.

"She's frightened," I told Peel. "She evidently didn't connect Violet with me until I walked into the room."

"She'll be more frightened when she comes down," said Peel. "And then maybe she'll talk."

He took a turn the length of the workroom and back. "I can't get over the handkerchiefs and that bit of lace. She must have kept 'em for years. Just couldn't resist 'em. Probably she thought that pink and blue paper was the prettiest she'd ever seen. Imagine the pangs of conscience she's suffered, Jonas; the gradual moral disintegration. A tragedy in miniature."

When she came down, dressed for the street, half an hour later it was clear that Peel was right. She was blue with terror. I imagine she would have tried to slip out unnoticed, but Violet came with her, talking loudly and cheerily. Peel went out into the hall and called to them to come in.

Matilda Wren came unwillingly.

"It's late," she said. "I've got to go home."

I was sorry for her, standing there in her prim black suit, her blurred face full of terror, looking from one to the other of us, uncertain from which direction danger might come. And yet at the same time I experienced

a sense of spiritual nausea, for if she was pathetic, she was also pretty sickening. I could see the same feeling in Peel's face, hardening his heart.

"I have some questions to ask you, Miss Wren," he said sternly; "and I advise you, for your own sake, to answer them truthfully."

"You've no right to question me," cried Matilda Wren defiantly. "I've done nothing."

"Oh, yes, you have," said Violet suddenly, and her usually amiable face wore a look of cold anger that I had never seen on it before. "You broke up the Blaine Warrington marriage with an anonymous letter two years ago."

Miss Wren sat down suddenly on the nearest chair.

"I did not. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't be silly," said Violet contemptuously. "I've spent the day doing a little investigating of my own. You were Mrs. Warrington's hairdresser and went to her every week. And you did the hair of that Mrs. Train, whom she named as co-respondent."

"You can't prove anything," gasped Miss Wren.

"I don't need to. I know you were Mrs. Seymour's hairdresser and I can guess who wrote her that letter the day before Belle Seymour killed herself. You're a cruel, bitter woman, Miss Wren. You can't bear that any one should be happy."

"Belle Seymour had spent the week-end in Washington with a man," cried Miss Wren, her face flushing hotly.

None of us spoke. After a moment she swung round on us defiantly.

"What business is it of yours? I did what I thought was right."

"Mrs. Aiken tells me that you are also Mrs. Kingsley's hairdresser," said Peel.

She wilted a little and the blue tinge crept back around her mouth.

"Yes," she said sullenly. "What of it?"

"Simply that I would like to have you explain why you wrote these letters on her letter paper."

He took from his pocket the three pink envelopes. Two he opened and spread the letters on the desk. The third he held in his hand. I saw Matilda Wren looking at it.

"I don't have to answer your questions, and I won't," she said flatly.

Peel picked up the letters again.

"Then I have no choice but to apply for a search warrant to search your apartment," he said. He put the letters in his pocket and turned toward the door. Miss Wren called him back in a strangled voice.

"Wait! Wait! You hurry me so." She was gasping for breath. "There's no need for you to search my apartment. I wrote them. At least I wrote two letters on that paper. I—I took a few sheets. I thought Mrs. Kingsley wouldn't mind."

"When did you take them?"

"Oh—months ago. But I never used them. And then—then I learned some things——"

Peel handed her the letter to Mrs. Clapp.

"You wrote that?"

"Yes."

"What was the scandal you referred to?"

"I—I found out Mrs. Clapp, Jr., was letting men come up to her studio by that stairway in the empty house."

"Men and women," interpolated Violet, her face sick with distaste. "Her friends."

"And that was all you had in mind?" persisted Peel.

"It's enough, isn't it?" Miss Wren snapped.

Peel gave her the second letter—the one to Lucy.

"You wrote that?"

"I did. I thought some one ought to tell her that Mr. Radnor had a Chinese wife."

"He didn't. He had an American wife in China, and she was dead."

"I didn't know that," said Matilda Wren sullenly.

"How did you hear about it?"

"I heard Mr. Jenkins and Mrs. Kingsley talking about it one day. I was dressing to leave, and they were in the next room. They'd both been in China when it happened. He said he'd just met the man again and he called himself Philip Radnor, but he'd swear it was the same man."

Peel said nothing. He stood turning the third letter in his hand, staring into the fire. Matilda Wren watched him, fascinated. At last she could stand it no longer.

"What's that?" she asked. "Is that another letter? Because if it is, I didn't write it. I only wrote those two."

"No," said Peel, "you didn't write this."

"But it's the same paper."

He took out the letter and handed it to her.

"Want to claim it?"

She devoured it avidly.

"Mrs. Kingsley could have written that herself," she said. "Lawrence Vincent used to be at her apartment a lot."

"Sure you didn't overhear something and write it yourself?"

"I didn't," cried Miss Wren. "Why should I lie about it? I'd tell you if I'd written it."

"Well," said Peel, "Mrs. Kingsley didn't write it—and the handwriting expert agrees that the printing in this letter is quite different from the printing in the other two. Can you tell us who did write it?"

Miss Wren shook her head, a puzzled look in her eyes.

"Can you guess who might have written it?"

"No."

I think the fortnight that followed was probably the most difficult and painful in the whole course of the investigation, for nothing happened. And the date set for Radnor's trial, already twice postponed by the efforts of his counsel, was now definitely set for February 26th.

The inaction was horribly galling to Peel. To have so much in his hands and yet to find himself face to face with a blank wall in which he could find no opening, drew upon everything he had of patience and fortitude.

He kept battering his head against the wall. He spent days interviewing the people in Mrs. Kingsley's apartment house. He questioned Mamie, the maid.

I think, from something he said, that he even contrived, by a judicious use of bribery, to spend an hour or so alone in Mrs. Kingsley's apartment, but nothing came of it. I know he put one of his own men on watch to supplement the headquarters man.

Bullitt was frankly sceptical about Mrs. Kingsley, and the man in the brown overcoat did not interest him at all.

"Seeing ghosts—that's what he is," he said to me on one occasion when we discussed the matter. "Funny how this case has got him."

"He's got some theory about it," I said lamely.

"Theory! Theory!" cried Bullitt irritably. "Peel isn't an amateur, God knows, but sometimes he acts like one. What's theory got to do with it? You have a lot of facts and you put them together and the obvious answer is the right one—ninety-nine times out of a hundred."

"There's always the hundredth time." I said cruelly. And Bullitt got a bit red around the ears. He has never got over the affair of the twin bellboys, when Peel saved his official life for him; nor, to do him justice, has he ever ceased to be grateful.

"True enough, Mr. Aiken," he admitted. "But there's nothing about these two cases that's queer. Here we have a perfectly obvious murder: motive, opportunity, weapon all complete; and a perfectly obvious case of a bank cashier absconding with the funds—and the inspector has to make a mystery of it. And as for the two cases being connected, we've nothing to show it, except those three letters on the same letter paper. And Peel himself says the third one was written by a different person."

"Well," I said, "he has his reasons."

"Of course," Bullitt went on uneasily. "I know he likes Radnor and he's sorry for Vincent's kid. Doggone it, so am I. But you can't let your feelings run away with you in a case."

"When did Peel ever let his feelings run away with him?" I demanded with some heat.

"I think he's doing it now," said Bullitt doggedly. And I confess I agreed with Bullitt. But nothing under heaven would have persuaded me to admit it.

CHAPTER XIX

Tuesday, February 20. 6 p.m.

ALL things come to an end and the inaction of this painful fortnight was brought to a close by an incident so startling that for a moment it drove everything else from our minds.

Lucy had been at our house a great deal since Philip Radnor's arrest.

"You don't mind, do you, darling?" Violet had said, at the beginning. "She's so wretched, poor child. And it seems to comfort her to come here."

I did mind. As a matter of fact, I minded horribly. I am a man who likes peace in my own home, and the sight of Lucy's wan, tragic face was conducive of anything but peace of mind. But I said the appropriate things to Violet. After all, I am very fond of Lucy.

So it happened that on the evening of February 20, about a week before the date set for Radnor's trial, Lucy came in for cocktails and then Lucy, Violet and I went round to Pietro's for dinner.

Violet had had the forethought to order the dinner ahead of time, and Pietro outdid himself. We had, I remember, a very good risotto and really superb zabaglione, quite the best I have ever eaten. And Pietro brought out a bottle from his private stock. So we should have been quite gay. But the gaiety had a hollow note, whistling to keep our courage up.

I had been to the jail to see Radnor that afternoon and Lucy could talk of nothing else. She made me repeat every word of our conversation over and over. He had told me of the new defence his counsel, Raymond Pertwe, was building up on Peel's theory of the

man in the brown coat. I made a great point—to Lucy—of the confidence and the hope he expressed. I said nothing to her about the very obvious fact that Radnor knew as well as I did how slim his chances were. A man in such a situation must cling to hope, but Radnor kidded himself as little as any man I ever saw. He said nothing of this to me. I read it between the lines, so to speak. His talk was entirely matter of fact and practical. There were things he wanted me to do. Oh, he had courage. He could take it.

It was only as I was leaving that his control broke for a moment. I told him Lucy wanted to see him again before the trial. He turned white.

"For God's sake, don't let her come," he said, and his voice shook. "I've got to keep hold of myself."

I promised to think up some good reason why she should not come.

But Lucy saw through my reasons at once. She looked at me—a long, grave look, before which, I'm ashamed to say, my eyes faltered. She smiled a very little smile and laid her hand on mine.

"You're a poor liar, Jonas," she said gently. "I won't go, of course."

"It isn't that he doesn't want you," I said lamely.

Lucy looked down at the tablecloth.

"I know him so well," she said in a low voice.

"That's really what love is, isn't it, Jonas? Knowing some one so well that you don't need to be told. You don't need or want explanations."

I said nothing. Discussions about love always embarrass me. Violet came to my rescue.

"Of course it is, darling."

"I honour him so," cried poor Lucy, her eyes full of tears. "He's the best man I've ever known." She blew her nose until it was quite pink and then powdered it back to normal.

"All right," she said. "You needn't look to see if any one's noticing, Jonas. I'll behave myself."

"Good girl!" I applauded, considerably relieved.

"I've heard the picture at the Rialto is very funny," said Violet.

So we went to the Rialto. And we laughed—after a fashion.

It was late when we got home after dropping Lucy at her apartment—almost midnight by the dashboard clock. As we pulled in to the curb another car, coming from the opposite direction, drew up across the street. It was Peel's car and he leaned out and called to me.

"I'm going out to Winslow Thompson's," he said. "Want to come along?"

A moment before and I would have said that nothing on earth could have dragged me out again that night. But there was something in his voice. I locked the car and leaving Violet protesting on the sidewalk, climbed in beside Peel.

Always a reckless driver, that night he outdid himself. I have never understood why we weren't killed when we dashed between a belated street car and an interurban moving van at North Avenue and St. Paul Street, and again when, ignoring traffic lights, we dashed across the double intersection into Greenway. But we weren't. And between gasps, I even managed to draw the basic facts of the situation from Peel.

It seems that Winslow Thompson, returning from dinner at a friend's house about eleven-twenty, had been shot at as he was getting out his key to open the door. The bullet missed him, and while he was frantically trying to get his door open he could hear some one running away.

He got the door open finally, went in and bolted it, and called Peel.

"Why not the police?" I asked reasonably.

"Because," said Peel grimly, "of something he found lying on the hall floor."

It was at this point that he cut across a red light into Greenway, dodging two automobiles and an open cart. When I caught my breath I inquired what it was that Thompson had seen.

"An envelope with a printed address," said Peel grimly. "It had evidently been stuck under the door. Thompson kicked against it when he went in, so that it skidded across the floor. That's how he came to notice it."

He drew into the curb in front of a flight of steps that led up a high bank to a big white house set well back from the street in a lot of evergreen shrubbery.

A pallid butler, clad rakishly in a pair of trousers pulled on over gay striped pyjamas, opened the door for us, and a moment later Winslow Thompson came out of the library door to meet us. He was still in dinner coat, a distinguished looking figure. He was evidently shaken by his recent harrowing experience, but he had himself in hand.

"I've done exactly as you advised, Inspector. The letter has not been touched." And he pointed to a white envelope lying in the middle of the hall, against the edge of a rug, where it had brought up after slithering across a yard or two of waxed boards. Peel bent over it without touching it.

The stiff paper was a little bent and rumped, as though there had been some difficulty in pushing it under the door, and there was a smudge of dust across one end. Carefully, in his gloved fingers, Peel picked it up and looked about him. Winslow Thompson, interpreting his glance, said:

"Right in here, Inspector," and led the way into the library.

It was a pleasant room, spacious and with more books

in it than are commonly found in libraries. There was a big flat desk near the windows and on this Peel laid the letter down. Picking up a paper cutter from the desk, he slit the envelope carefully and drew out the enclosure. This in turn he spread on the blotter.

The message, printed in pencil in staggering capitals read as follows:

GET SEVENTY THOUSAND DOLLARS IN FIVE, TEN, AND TWENTY DOLLAR BILLS AND WAIT FOR OUR INSTRUCTIONS. IF YOU DO NOT DO AS WE TELL YOU, YOU WILL BE TAKEN FOR A RIDE AND YOU WON'T COME BACK. OUR AIM WILL BE BETTER NEXT TIME. WE MEAN BUSINESS.

"Good God!" muttered Winslow Thompson dazedly. And he took a cigarette from a box on the desk and lit it with hands that trembled slightly. "I haven't that much cash in the world, Inspector. I've been hit, like everybody else."

"Could you raise it?"

"I suppose so. But it would pretty well clean me out."

"Well, well, don't do it yet. Now suppose you give me a detailed account of what happened."

Thompson made a determined effort to pull himself together.

"I dined at the Hasletts, in Ruxton. I left there—oh, roughly speaking, about eleven. I didn't hurry coming in. I suppose it took me nearly half an hour. I put the car in the garage and walked around the house to the front door."

"There's no direct connection between the garage and the house?"

"Naturally there is. But it's a pleasant evening and I preferred to stroll round through the grounds for a breath of air before going in."

"I see. Please go on."

"As you may have noticed, there are four or five steps leading up to the front door. I had just reached the top when I heard a sound in the shrubbery. There are several arborvitae on each side of the door, and the sound seemed to come from the group on the near side—to my left. I turned toward it and just then I saw the flash of a gun through the foliage. And a second later, when the noise of the shot died away, I heard some one running round the corner of the house."

"You saw no one?"

"No. The shrubbery screened him from me. I knew it would be foolish to follow him unarmed. So I got the door open as quickly as I could and came in. That was when I stumbled against the letter, of course. The hall was lighted and I saw it skidding across the floor. I went at once to the telephone and called you."

Outside, far down the street, a police siren shrilled.

"That will be Bullitt," Peel said. "Before he gets here, I just want a look around."

And he slipped quickly out of the room and out of the house.

I followed him and a moment later found him in the shrubbery, with his electric torch turned on a spot on the ground. There was still a little snow there, partially trodden into the mud.

"This is where the fellow stood," he said. "Fairly large shoe—a ten, at a guess. Heels worn down on the outside." He followed the tracks with his torch. "Two sets of prints, one going into the shrubbery and one out—ah, here we are!" He had lost the tracks temporarily on the withered grass but he picked them up again on a flower bed that bordered the cement driveway.

The man had evidently come up the driveway until he was opposite the house, crossed to the shrubbery, and, after firing his shot retreated in the same way. The

massed shrubbery on the lawn would have screened him from any one standing in the door of the house.

Peel went back to the garage. It was easy enough to pick up Mr. Thompson's track. There was a clear print on a spot of bare earth near the garage door, where the ground was softened by the sudden thaw. The single pair of prints circled the house to the front door.

All this had taken us not more than three minutes but Bullitt's men were already there when we reached the steps, and Bullitt himself, grim of countenance and terribly official, nodded briefly to us as he swept by and in at the open front door.

Peel waited until the last policeman had gone in and then he entered and approached the butler, who had so far forgotten himself as to stand at the library door, peering in over a blue-coated shoulder. Peel tapped his arm and the butler started violently.

"I—I beg your pardon, sir." And he added, in a burst of confidence: "All this is very upsetting, sir."

"Naturally," said Peel soothingly. "No doubt you were roused out of a sound sleep by the shot."

"I was sir. It was like the crack of doom, sir."

"Perhaps," suggested Peel, "you'll just step into the dining-room and tell us about it."

The butler agreed willingly and led the way, turning up the wall lights by means of a switch as he entered. We sat down beside the shining mahogany table and Peel invited the butler to be seated too. He sat on the edge of a chair with the air of a man who doubts the propriety of what he is doing.

The butler's name, it appeared, was Stevens. He had been in the employ of Mr. Winslow Thompson for a year and a half—ever since Mr. Thompson's return from Russia. And before that he had been for ten years in the employ of the Sage Whartons, who were old friends of Mr. Thompson's. He had always served very

respectable people. A thing like this had never happened to him before—never.

He looked on the point of bursting into tears. Peel hastily changed the subject.

"You say you were roused by the shot. Did you realise what it was?"

"No, sir. I woke up feeling that something was wrong. It occurred to me that Mr. Thompson might have forgotten his key and that he might be trying to rouse me, so I slipped on my trousers and went downstairs. And then I heard Mr. Thompson on the telephone telling some one he'd been shot at. So I went to the library and he asked me to wait and let the police in when they came."

"Did you by any chance look out your window when you first woke up?"

"No, sir. It did not occur to me to do so."

Peel had finished with him.

"Does any one else sleep in the house?"

"Only the cook," Stevens told us. "He's French, sir, name of Pierre Duval." It was clear that Stevens had a poor opinion of the French. "His room is on the other side of the house, sir, and he sleeps like a hog. I imagine he's still asleep."

"Go and wake him up," said Peel, "and bring him here."

Stevens departed, a little unwillingly, I thought.

"What do you make of it, Jonas?"

"God knows! It's extraordinary!"

Peel stood for a moment looking out through the dark oblong of the window. When he turned back his face was grim.

"It's a sinister affair," he said in a low voice. "A black, wicked business. And the devil of it is, one doesn't know where the lightning will strike next."

Pierre Duval turned out to be a small, dapper

Frenchman with the incredible waxed moustache one associates with advertisements of a certain well-known hair tonic. He seemed to be an animated exclamation point. His black hair, parted in the middle, was sleeked to two sharp points, like little horns; his eyebrows were pointed; his chin, drawn down under his pursed-up mouth, was pointed; his shoulders and elbows, hunched in a perpetual shrug, were pointed. If he had been waked from a heavy sleep, he showed no signs of it. He was vividly alive and possessed of all his faculties.

No—a thousand pities, was it not?—he had not heard the shot. Had he heard it, he—Pierre—would have rushed down and apprehended the assassin of Monsieur. He would have shot him.

“And that, monsieur, would have been what you call justifiable homicide, no?”

A gun. How does it happen that Pierre Duval has a gun?

“But certainly, monsieur, when there is all this trouble and people around the grounds at night, and that house next door empty.”

“Which house is empty?” Peel asked.

“The house on the north side, beyond the drive.”

Peel drew circles on the margin of his notebook.

“People in the grounds at night. Just what do you mean by that?”

“People snooping, monsieur. Why, even to-night, before Monsieur Thompson went out, I saw a man near the garage door, and at once informed Monsieur Thompson. Together we searched for him, but he had disappeared—vanished like smoke—pouff!”

“Where was Stevens?”

“He was out, monsieur. It is his free afternoon.”

“There are other servants?”

“Yes, monsieur. A housemaid and a laundress and a man who cares for the grounds.”

Peel took their names and addresses. They had all been with Mr. Thompson for about the same length of time—since his return from Russia.

"And your revolver?" asked Peel. "What calibre?"

"A .32, monsieur."

"As far as you know, are there other guns in the house?"

"I know of none, monsieur."

Peel dismissed him and went out to the front door. Matthews, the ballistics' man from headquarters, was mounted on a chair, prying something from the outer jamb with a penknife.

"Here it is," he said to Peel. "A .38."

"Can you fix the direction?"

Matthews climbed down from the chair. He was a fat little man and he groaned gently when he moved.

"From the shrubbery—right where those footprints are."

Peel nodded and went back to the library. Bullitt had evidently been giving Stevens a bad time of it. The butler looked like a frightened rabbit and was trembling in every limb. As we entered he was saying almost with tears:

"I swear I had been in bed and asleep for an hour before it happened, sir."

When he saw Peel, Bullitt dismissed the butler curtly and Stevens fled from the room, with a policeman at his heels.

Winslow Thompson broke in nervously:

"Surely you don't think he had anything to do with it? He's always seemed most respectable and he had excellent references from friends of mine."

Bullitt shrugged.

"We'll just check up on his friends, all the same." He looked at Peel. "Make anything of the letter, Inspector?" he asked.

Peel replaced the letter in its envelope and folded the envelope in a clean sheet of paper.

"I'll let you know," he said.

A moment later we were outside the house. But Peel did not make immediately for the car. He stood on the paved walk, staring down at the brown grass. He stepped on it, and, withdrawing his foot, studied the impression.

"The cold spell certainly has broken," he said. "It's thawed down a couple of inches. And the snow's practically gone."

"It won't last," I said with a pessimism born of long experience of the Baltimore climate.

"That's what I was thinking," he said.

Meyric Hanson lived in a pretty little detached house on Elsinore Avenue in West Baltimore. It was half-past one when we drew up in front of it, and rang the bell. But we could see a light in one of the rear rooms.

Hanson came to the door at once, ancient leather slippers flapping on his feet; an ancient woollen smoking jacket sagging from his shoulders, his pipe in his hand. He peered at us short-sightedly in the dim light.

"Inspector Peel! And Mr. Aiken. Come in. Come in." He stood aside hospitably to let us pass, his round face beaming with anticipation. "You have something new, Inspector? Those letters——"

"I've got another one," Peel told him.

"Same paper?"

"No," said Peel, "but—— However, it's for you to tell me."

We went into the rear room where the light burned—a small, cluttered study, heavy with pipe smoke. The walls were covered with books, the floor was piled high with them, and the surface was covered with a drift of pamphlets, papers, ashes, and a fine assortment of

match boxes. On the flat-topped desk was a pile of manuscript.

"My book on analysis of handwriting," said Hanson proudly. "I work on it odd times when I have a chance." He laid it aside and spread out before him the four letters, the three pink ones and the new one written on cheap white paper, the kind that can be bought in any five and ten cent store. He hovered over them, making eager little clucking sounds. Presently he looked up at me.

"Our friend here knows many things that it is not his business to know," he said. "He makes polite gestures to me because I am an old man. But he does not need me." He looked over his glasses at Peel, who was smoking thoughtfully, his feet on the corner of the desk.

"Certainly," he said, "they are printed by the same person."

I sat up.

"What are you talking about?"

Hanson divided the four letters by laying a ruler between them, so that two lay on one side and two on the other.

"These two," he said, "one writer. These two another."

"Miss Matilda Wren," said Peel, squinting at a smoke ring. "And—who?"

"You mean to say," I exclaimed incredulously, "that the same person printed that letter about Lawrence Vincent and the one Mr. Thompson received to-night?"

"Certainly," said Hanson, and he launched into a highly technical discussion which I made no effort to follow. My head was whirling.

"So that brings us back to Mrs. Kingsley," said Peel at last. He got to his feet. "What the devil is that

woman's game?" he said, running a nervous hand through his hair. "It doesn't make sense."

I thought suddenly that he looked haggard and worn, and there were queer new lines of anxiety in his face.

"Well, come on, Jonas," he said.

On the way home I said:

"Come home with me. We can give you a shake-down."

He came, but he refused the shakedown. He established himself in my workroom with a box of cigarettes. I left him walking up and down in front of the fire, up and down. And in the morning I found him still at it.

When Bullitt left the Thompson house in the early hours of the morning he placed a police guard in the house and a man in the empty house across the drive, to watch the grounds. And a plain-clothes man was detailed to accompany Winslow Thompson wherever he went.

No prowlers had been sighted, but a letter came in the morning mail on the same cheap stationery, printed in the same staggering capitals.

DO NOT THINK THE POLICE CAN SAVE YOU.
GET THE MONEY AND HAVE IT ON HAND OR YOU
WILL BE SORRY. YOU WILL GET YOUR ORDERS
SOON.

Peel was again sent for and returned with the letter and the report that Winslow Thompson had gone to pieces on receipt of this second threat. He had retired to his room and locked the door, which he opened only on receiving proof of the identity of his visitor.

Later in the day, we learned afterwards, he insisted on going downtown with his escort and obtaining the

money asked for, putting up as security practically all of his holdings.

Bullitt came in about six o'clock and told us about it. He was indignant.

"The fellow's in a blue funk," he said disgustedly. "He jumps a mile if any one speaks to him suddenly. What the hell! He's got an armed guard like he was the King of Siam."

Bullitt, as the result of a conference with Peel that morning, had had Bessie Kingsley taken down to headquarters for questioning. He now told us about it.

She had been put through several hours of intensive grilling. Her apartment had been searched. The elevator man, the janitor, the neighbours had been questioned and cross-questioned. Mamie had been exhaustively interrogated. And the result of all these efforts had been nothing.

"By the way," Bullitt added, winking at me, "just to be nice, I asked everybody whether they'd ever seen a guy there in a brown coat and light grey hat. Well, it seems the neighbours don't like Mrs. Kingsley much. According to them, practically every man that went to the flat wore a coat that might have been brown and a hat that might have been light grey—if it wasn't tan or black."

Peel ignored the jibe.

"Think you can keep Thompson safe?" he asked.

"I think so," said Bullitt dryly. "I've got a man patrolling the grounds and one in the empty house next door. And there are two men in the house itself. That ought to do it."

But it didn't. Next morning, when Stevens carried the breakfast tray upstairs, no one answered his knock. The locked door was broken open and the room was discovered to be empty.

YOU PASS HOUSE WITH RED-SHADED LAMP IN WINDOW PLACE SUITCASE BEHIND LEFT GATE-POST AND GO STRAIGHT ON AS FAST AS YOU CAN. W. T. WILL BE RELEASED AFTER ONE HOUR IF YOU OBEY ORDERS. IF YOU NOTIFY POLICE OR BRING ANYONE WITH YOU W. T. WILL BE KILLED. YOU KNOW WE MEAN BUSINESS.

When he had finished studying the letter, Peel reached for his phone.

"We'll have to get Bullitt in on this."

That night Peel and Bullitt put the men under their command through a series of manœuvres.

Operating entirely in borrowed cars, and in disguises as effective as they were simple, they went into action as soon as the early dark settled down. Peel, in Violet's sedan with a changed licence plate, had already surveyed the ground early in the day. Wearing a derby hat, a stiff, stand-up collar and smoking a large cigar, he drove many miles out the Frederick Road, locating the most likely places.

With the result that, an hour after dusk had fallen, every pair of gateposts on the road between Baltimore and Frederick was under the observation of two men, concealed with infinite care and precaution in the nearest convenient hiding-place. They were under orders not to betray their presence but to shadow any one who might appear, if their particular pair of gateposts turned out to be the one in question.

Also, squads of men, heavily armed, were placed in automobiles at strategic points, where they would be easily available in case of emergency, and lookouts were placed on the most likely hills with flashlights and a system of prearranged signals.

The arrangements were singularly complete. It

seemed impossible that any one could escape from such a net.

Peel came in at dinner time for a hasty snack and explained the plan of campaign to us.

"Are you coming, Jonas?" he asked.

"I've been hoping that you'd ask me."

With one of his rare gestures of affection, he laid his arm across my shoulders.

"I'd as soon leave an arm or a leg behind," he said.

I was conscious of a warm, deep glow of pleasure. Pulling out my desk drawer, I took out my revolver, made sure it was loaded, and slipped it into my pocket. Nothing as delightful as this had happened since the war.

At nine-thirty we set out in a ramshackle but extremely fast car for Sutter's house. I wore a cap and a heavy sweater and Peel produced an incredibly dirty hat with a dilapidated brim and a windbreaker coat of great age and general shabbiness. On our way we picked up Scott and Macready, from Peel's office.

Sutter lived not far from Winslow Thompson, also in Guilford. We did not drive up to the house but stopped two blocks short of it, where we could see the front door. A car was standing in front of it: a small roadster with the rumble closed.

The plan was for Bullitt to precede Sutter by about five minutes. He was to drive a swanky limousine, dressed in a chauffeur's uniform, with two policemen, in swank overcoats and silk mufflers, with automatic rifles across their knees, on the back seat. The idea was to pick up the red-lighted window, if possible, pass the word along, and stand by for emergencies.

Peel and I, with Macready and Scott, were to trail Sutter, giving him a two-minute start.

Peel took out his watch and held it in his hand. At ten precisely we saw George Sutter come out of his front

door, carrying a suit-case. He put it into the roadster, got in himself, and drove away.

Then ensued two of the longest minutes I ever spent. Finally, after what seemed an age, Peel snapped his watch back into his pocket, put his foot on the starter, and we were off.

My heart was beating in my throat; my nerves were tingling with excitement. After all, I remain an amateur at such things. As far as I could see, my companions were as cool and unconcerned as though this sort of thing were a part of their everyday lives—as I suppose, come to think of it, it was. And yet, glancing again at Peel's grim, intent profile, I knew that this was more than routine to him. It was a challenge, a glove thrown in the face—part and parcel of this case that baffled him.

We drove by the prescribed route: across North Avenue, down Monroe Street and out along the Frederick Road. And then for the open country. It had been arranged that Sutter should drive at twenty-five miles an hour, and we dawdled along behind him, chafing, but not daring to speed up for fear it might be recognised that we were following him.

It was intensely dark. Low clouds hid the stars. And it was bleakly cold. It looked and felt as though snow were imminent.

"That would be a lucky break," said Peel when I mentioned it.

But it didn't snow; just got colder and darker.

We drove through Catonsville, and then, after a stretch of open country, through steep-pitched Ellicott City, clinging to its picturesque hills. Beyond that lay the long, open stretch to Frederick: lovely, rolling country, dimly seen under the lowering sky, the houses far apart, for the most part lonely.

And always we strained our eyes for a window with a red-shaded lamp.

Peel checked over, as we passed them, the gateposts he had noted in his daytime survey, but no red light gleamed to show that any one of them was the designated spot.

We had been driving for an hour and a half when he said:

"There's nothing for the next ten miles. Give me a cigarette, Jonas."

I had taken it from my case and was feeling for a match when I saw it—a red light winking through bare branches in the window of what seemed to be a small house set in a narrow hollow far back from the road to the right.

"There it is!" I cried and pointed.

"I see it," said Peel, "but there's no gate-post. Yes, by Jove, there is too. An old five-bar gate in the pasture—there!"

As we swung slowly round a curve in the road, our headlights picked it up briefly—a rocky farm road running beside a tumbledown stone wall, and ending in an old-fashioned five-bar gate. The road ran back along the edge of a wood to the house, perhaps a quarter of a mile distant. And beside the left-hand post of the gate stood an oblong black object—the suit-case.

I could hear Peel cursing under his breath. He drove slowly past until the wood hid us from the gate and the house. Then he drew off to the side, where a convenient break in the trees offered cover. He left the motor running.

"Get out, Jonas. Macready, take the car on to the crossroads and tell Simmons we've found the place and to pass the word around. Have Morton notified on the back road and then get back here."

Macready drove on and Peel, Scott, and I began to

retrace our steps with infinite caution toward the gate.

It was bitterly cold, and so still that every sound carried with alarming distinctness. Once Peel grasped my arm and Scott's, and we stood for a moment without breathing. I fancied I could hear a faint snapping off in the woods to my left, but I could not be sure.

Twice, in that eighth of a mile trek, we had to draw back into the underbrush to avoid the lights of passing motors. But, after what seemed an interminable time, we came to the corner of the wood beyond which lay the five-bar gate.

We listened, but no sound broke the stillness. Cautiously, inch by inch, we drew nearer and at last attained a position where we could see the gate without ourselves being seen.

I said we could see the gate. By that I mean we could see where it was, and the faint lightening of the gloom which marked the end of the farm road. Then we waited.

There was no sound, no living creature stirring. The red light continued to wink derisively from the window of the distant house.

After a while we began to hear the hum of distant motors which approached but did not pass. The cordon was drawing in.

I was shivering from head to foot, partly from excitement and partly from cold. I was suddenly aware of the sound of my teeth chattering and ground them together to silence them. We must have been there, by that time, fully half an hour. Once more I felt Peel's hand on my arm, and this time his breath was hot on my cheek.

"I'm going to investigate," he whispered. "Stay here."

He crawled away and was swallowed up in the darkness. Once more minutes dragged by, lagging,

interminable. And then Peel's voice distinct and surprisingly near at hand.

"The fellow's put it over on us. Look at this."

Scott and I joined him at once by the gate. Peel's torch was turned down at an object on the ground at his feet. It was the suit-case all right, and it was empty.

"We're going up to the house," Peel said, "at once."

We must have made an interesting procession: three disreputable-looking men, blue with cold, stumbling up the rutted road, each grasping a revolver, ready for instant use. And one at least of the three staring with extreme discomfort at the wall of trees that bounded the road to the left. As we neared the house we abandoned the road, climbed the tumbledown stone wall, and proceeded under such cover as it afforded, almost to the front door.

Here we stopped to reconnoitre. We could see the house now. It was above us, on a slight rise, and we could see its outline against the sky: a small, two-story shack—certainly not more than four rooms, all told. And the sagging roof beam betrayed its condition.

Except for the single red-shaded lamp, it was dark, and no sound whatever came from it.

"They must be miles away by now," said Peel disgustedly. "I'm going in."

And without more ado he walked up to the front door and put his left hand on the knob. The door opened under his hand, and Peel, with Scott and myself at his heels, walked into the room.

It was a horrible little room, dirty, with soiled paper peeling from the walls. There was no furniture, if one except a flimsy packing-case on which stood a cheap glass oil-lamp, its chimney covered with a red paper shade made by folding a piece of red wrapping paper over an ordinary white china lamp shade. The lamp

was apparently new. The brass rim that held the chimney was shiny and untarnished.

Peel cast a rapid glance around the room, and then, his flashlight in his left hand, his revolver in his right, made for a door on the far side. It was not quite shut. He kicked it open and flashed his light around the dark room beyond.

"My God!" he muttered.

He thrust his revolver unsteadily into his pocket and went in. We followed.

The room was a small lean-to—evidently once the kitchen, for a rusty stove still stood in one corner. In the opposite corner was a pile of hay which had evidently been used as a bed. That was all.

The place was a shambles. Blood was spattered against the unpainted walls. The hay was matted and soaked with it.

Indifferent to shame, I fled back through the front room into the open air.

CHAPTER XXI

Friday, February 23. 1 a.m.

It seemed an age but it can only have been a few minutes before Bullitt and his men began to close in on the house. They had approached from both directions along the Frederick Road and along a back road that ran a quarter of a mile behind the house, and they had stopped such cars as they met, but had found nothing suspicious.

Bullitt went at once into the house, but I made no attempt to follow. I fixed my mind on the suave, lovely line of the rolling country against the sky, on the scudding clouds, on the sharp gusts of icy wind that were beginning to pierce the quiet of the little sloping valley where I stood. Anything to keep from thinking of that horror in the house behind me.

After a while I became conscious of men coming out of the house and beginning to circle it, their torches turned upon the ground. I walked around the house. Peel was standing in the back door of that horrible room, examining the ground.

"This way," he said. He raised his torch and flashed it about. Its beam fell on a little shed, leaning sideways against the wind. Its rickety door was closed by a big stone.

I pulled myself together and followed Peel and Bullitt across the yard. One of the policemen shoved the stone out of the way and opened the door.

Inside there had been, apparently, some effort made to dig a grave, but the effort had been abandoned as being too difficult or too pointless. In this shallow hollow, partially covered with earth, lay the horribly crushed body of Winslow Thompson. The weapon with

which the thing had been done—a heavy stick about the size of a baseball bat—lay on the ground beside him.

For another two hours sirens screeched along the road and experts came and went. Dr. Melzner appeared in his ancient Ford, and presently an ambulance drove up and the mortal remains of Winslow Thompson were carted away on a covered stretcher.

Melzner, Peel, and Bullitt came out of the shed together. The doctor was drawing on his enormous knitted gloves and cursing the weather in a fluent mixture of German and English. Bullitt interrupted the flow with determination.

"You think he was killed as soon as they got him out here?" he asked.

"How should I know?" said Melzner irritably. "How do I know when the scoundrels brought him here? Am I a policeman? But I tell you this: he has been dead many hours—ten anyway. Maybe twelve."

"We'll have to get a dentist's identification," said Bullitt thoughtfully.

"*Gott im Himmel, ja!*" assented Melzner. "Not his own mother would know him."

And he pulled his muffler about his ears, climbed back into his car, and went chugging back to town.

Peel saw me.

"Be with you in a moment, Jonas," he said. He went into the house. I saw the lamp go out. A policeman carried in an electric standard torch to take its place. Presently Peel came out carrying the glass lamp carefully, and stowed it, wrapped in a lap rug, in the back of the car.

I looked at my watch. It was nearly four o'clock. We climbed in wearily and headed back toward Baltimore.

I slept late the next day, and it was noon when I

strolled into Peel's office and found him with the glass lamp on the desk in front of him, studying it lovingly.

"Well, Jonas," he said cheerfully, "I've found out where it came from."

"The deuce you have."

"It's a variety made specially for Roebuck and Ward and shipped by them all over the country."

"That's a great help," I said acidly.

"Maybe so—maybe not," he said airily. "Never can tell."

"How'd you find out so soon?"

"Simple—to one of my talents. After all, places in town aren't so liable to stock kerosene lamps—don't use 'em much in cities any more. But Roebuck and Ward—as you can see at once if you read your advertisements, Jonas—ships by every rural free delivery route in the country, spreading the benefits of our civilisation—at low cost—to places unblessed by electricity. So I tried 'em and hit it right, first crack out of the box."

"And I suppose they told you at once who bought this particular lamp."

"As a matter of fact they didn't," said Peel regretfully. "They could find no record of any recent sale of a kerosene lamp to any one in the immediate vicinity."

"So what?"

"So I'm going out to see Thompson's gardener."

"What's the connection?"

"I want to see why he didn't turn up this morning to work."

"How do you know he didn't?"

"I don't know. I'm just betting."

"Any odds?"

"Two dollars will get you four."

"Done."

And doggone it if he wasn't right. When we drove by the Thompson house we found policemen all over

the place, the servants having hysterics in the library and Bullitt in a fine frenzy of delight. He had found a suspect. The gardener had failed to show up that morning, and when a plain-clothesman called at his house, his landlady said he had gone out the evening of Winslow Thompson's disappearance about ten, and had not come in again.

Peel said nothing. He listened for a few minutes and then we went away from there. We went round to the house where the gardener lived—one of a row of bedraggled little houses on Keswick Road. On the doorstep a middle-aged woman in a shabby coat stood complaining with a neighbour.

"The police," she was saying. "All over the place with their warrants and such, and him a nice quiet man as wouldn't hurt a fly."

"The police here?" asked Peel politely.

The woman looked us up and down suspiciously.

"They're in Jim Parsons' room," she said, and added tartly, "and who's to know they're not stealing things—or planting things that have no business there. It's a wicked crime, mister, and I'd say it if you was the police commissioner himself—framing an honest man that's too poor to protect himself."

The neighbour looked on avidly, and two or three other people edged up to us. It looked like the makings of a crowd.

"Can we go inside?" Peel asked.

She stared at him with a mixture of hostility and secret curiosity. At last she opened the door grudgingly.

"You can come in if you want."

We followed her into a shabby living-room with a vase of paper flowers on a centre table.

"Boarded with me three years," she said defensively, "and never a complaint. A nice, quiet fellow, always

patient, with all his troubles. And that daughter of his!"

"He has a daughter?"

"He has that. Let me tell you, if he's really in trouble, 'twas her got him into it."

"Does she live here too?"

"Not her. Ran off and left him three years ago to marry a Mexican that plays in a band—when he ain't drunk. First along they used to soft soap Jim for what they could get, and then this Mexican fellow got to making big money. I always suspicioned it was bootlegging but it was no affair of mine. Anyway, after that they threw the old man out. Won't let him in the house. He went once because he met Rosie on the street and he thought she looked bad. And would you believe it, that skunk had him into court for disturbing the peace?"

"Jim Parsons now," said Peel. "Has he a lot of friends?"

"Not that I know of. Tony, the shoemaker on the corner, is the only one I know. Very quiet and regular, was Jim. Never went anywhere except to drink a glass of beer with Tony now and again."

"Have you a picture of Parsons?"

It seemed that she had—a cheap one taken on his birthday the year before. She explained, with tears, that he had had it taken for Rosie, but Rosie had flung it back in his face on the occasion of his last ill-fated visit, so she had asked for it. She had told the police that she hadn't one, but if Peel would promise her to return it——

He would. He put the photograph in his pocket and we went upstairs.

Two men in plain clothes were painstakingly going through Parsons' meagre little bedroom, furnished chiefly with snapshots of a rather pretty little dark-haired girl at various ages.

"Find anything?" asked Peel.

One of the men grunted disgustedly.

"No, sir. Nothing but pictures of a kid and some letters from a girl named Rosie."

"His daughter?"

"Yeah."

We went out. The landlady was once more on the step, talking now to a larger group, whose eyes followed us curiously down the street.

Tony the cobbler had nothing to contribute. He was so obviously a harmless, gentle old fellow. And he was very much distressed at the gossip going about.

"Jim a fina fellow," he told us over and over, very earnestly. "His daughter no good, but pretty. Her husband, what you call a bad egg."

He had not seen Parsons for three days. He could tell us nothing.

"How old a man is Parsons?" Peel asked him.

"Mebbe forty-five, mebbe feefty."

Peel decided to call on the son-in-law. Tony gave us his name, Porfirio Masca, and his address.

But we found that Porfirio Masca had been arrested three days before for drunken driving and was still in jail.

Days passed. The denunciations against the Baltimore police now rose in a mounting crescendo. Editors fulminated against their incompetence and urged a shake-up. To judge from the indignant letters that deluged the press and the police, the citizenry of Baltimore were convinced that they could no longer sleep safe in their beds o' nights.

On Saturday Mottram dropped in at Clancy's at lunch time, looking for Peel. He came over to our table and sat down. He looked years older than he did the day he brought Peel Mrs. Clapp's letter.

"That ass Bullitt," he groaned.

"Now, now, Commissioner," Peel reproved him gently.

"I'm past the joking stage," said Mottram gloomily. "These fellows will have my hide if something's not done. Did you see that cartoon of Duff's in the *Star-paper* this morning?"

Peel laughed gently.

"It was a swell likeness, but a little on the fat side, Commissioner."

"Fat!" Mottram scowled. "Look here, my lad, what the hell has happened? What's going on? I recognise of course that Bullitt's doing his best. Since you're in the dark, too, I'll even go so far as to say that he's doing the best any one can do."

"You flatter me," murmured Peel.

"But what in hell is up? *You* know and I know—in spite of what these damn newspapers say—that the police here are pretty damn good. Yet here they fall down on three cases running—and all of them important."

Peel's eyes glinted with a look I knew.

"Not three cases, commissioner—one case. When we catch the man responsible for the Thompson kidnapping, we'll have the fellow that killed Jenkins and did away with Lawrence Vincent."

Mottram's heavy eyebrows drew together and he looked at Peel—a sharp, searching look.

"What grounds have you for thinking Lawrence Vincent is dead?"

Peel drummed on the table with his fingers.

"Well, you haven't found him."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Not much," admitted Peel with a grin.

Mottram flushed. Peel went on:

"When you couple that with the fact that some one

undoubtedly bought that passage on the *Santa Ana* and tried to make the police believe that Vincent had done it——”

“ You can’t prove it wasn’t Vincent.”

“ Maybe not—yet. But I know it wasn’t Vincent.”

“ Well, granting that for the sake of argument——”

“ But why should Vincent have been framed if he was really the guilty party? And if he isn’t guilty, why doesn’t he come forward and prove it? The only answer I can think of is that he can’t—that he’s dead.”

Mottram shifted uncomfortably. I had a feeling that, if it had been anybody but Peel, he would have hooted frank derision. But he had had experience with Peel before.

“ Well, for the sake of argument, granting all that—although, as you yourself admit, you can’t prove a word of it—what then?”

“ Hanson says the Vincent letter and the two kidnapping letters were printed by the same person.”

“ You know as well as I you can’t prove anything by that. They’d get a bunch of experts on the other side that would swear the opposite.”

“ When they do,” said Peel, “ it won’t matter.”

On Monday Philip Radnor’s trial for the wilful murder of Boyd Jenkins began. Lucy and Violet insisted on going, although I told them it would take days to pick the jury. As a matter of fact it did take three days. And they went every day and stayed all day long. They were really exhausted before the trial began.

I stayed away. I’m not a glutton for punishment—like Violet—and it seemed to me that, all in all, I couldn’t stand it.

I ran into Raymond Pertwe, Radnor’s lawyer, in the Haviland Street Club late in the afternoon of the day on which the first evidence was presented. He looked

tired and I would not have approached him, but he beckoned to me and I joined him in the corner of the lounge, where he sat with a cocktail on the table beside him.

"Did Peel get anywhere on that Roebuck and Ward lead?" he asked.

"No."

He closed his eyes for a moment, and then reached over for his cocktail.

"Good Lord, I'm tired." He drank, and then went on conversationally: "I suppose Peel hasn't turned up anything new?"

"I haven't seen him for three days," I said. "If he'd got anything, I'm sure you'd have heard from him."

"Oh, yes, no doubt. Well——" He finished his drink and rose. "I must get on."

I bade him good-night and watched his departure with a sinking heart. Nothing that had happened so far had shown me so clearly the desperate peril in which Philip Radnor now stood.

I went around to Clancy's, but Peel was not there. I found him in his office, walking up and down. He turned on me without preamble.

"What have I overlooked, Jonas? There aren't any perfect crimes."

"I've just seen Pertwe," I told him.

He groaned.

"What did he say?"

"He didn't say anything. He asked if you had found anything new."

For a long time Peel stood with his back to me, staring out the window. At last he said:

"I haven't left this office for three days, except to sleep and eat. I've put this case together in a dozen different ways—like a jigsaw puzzle—and taken it apart

again, and it doesn't make sense. I get part of one picture and part of another. There's something missing, and God knows what it is."

He swung round on me, his face white and haggard.

"There's only one fact that emerges very clearly, Jonas," he said, "and that is, that, barring an act of God, Radnor will hang."

And, as a matter of fact three days later, Radnor was found guilty of the wilful murder of Boyd Jenkins.

That was the night, already referred to, when I dreamed about the hanging of the man whose face I could not see, and woke to find Violet crying into her pillow.

In the guest-room overhead I could hear the soft rap of Lucy's slipper heels, back and forth, back and forth. I suppose she walked the floor all night. Certainly she was still doing it when at last I dropped asleep again, about five o'clock.

CHAPTER XXII

Saturday, March 3—Monday, March 12.

To all outward seeming, Peel dropped the case. He did nothing more about it and he would not talk about it. He gave up coming to our house because Violet and Lucy, who was now staying with us, would give him no peace. And one day when Violet called him up he was definitely rude to her. She came to me in tears and I fled the house. I wished devoutly that, like Peel, I could stay away until it was all over.

He busied himself all day long in routine matters—picayune affairs which he usually left to his subordinates. It was clear to me, who knew him so well,

that he was deliberately keeping his mind off the Jenkins case. And I remembered his theory that when the conscious mind does not get you anywhere, it is time to give the subconscious mind a chance.

One evening, a week or so after Radnor's conviction, I went into his office late and found him going through a pile of papers on his desk. He looked up absently, greeted me and went back to his slow shuffling of the papers before him. I sat down, lit a cigarette, and watched him.

"What is it?" I asked at last. "A game?"

He smiled faintly and looked at me with more attention.

"It always amuses me," he said, "why in heaven's name should people buy things with stamps when money orders are so easy to get."

"Because," I suggested, "they have the stamps on hand and they have to go to the post office for the money order."

"But, after all, not many people"—he glanced at the form in front of him—"have twenty-two dollars and thirty-six cents in stamps."

"What have you got there?" I asked.

"One of the oddities that comes to my attention every now and then." He smiled. "All merchants are required to report to the post office any purchase of over ten dollars which is paid for in stamps. The object, of course, is to keep some kind of check on stolen stamps. Firms that use a lot of stamps have quite a bit of trouble that way. Employees steal stamps and use them to buy things with. You'd be surprised. Last year an employee of one of the big correspondence schools bought enough paint to paint his house, and a complete new set of plumbing, with stamps he'd stolen."

"It would never have occurred to me," I admitted.

"The reports come through our office. Of course,

the mail order houses are the ones who are most concerned. A lot of their business is done in stamps—small articles. And you'd be surprised how many big things, too." He riffled through the pages. "These are some Roebuck and Ward reports. Here's an article—an outboard motor, of all things—that cost \$92.85—paid for in stamps."

"But how silly! Let me see."

I looked over his shoulder. There was a long list of incredible articles—overcoats, suits, hats, shoes.

"Well," I conceded, "I've always thought there were a lot of crazy people around."

Peel grinned and sat back in his chair. He propped the papers up against his inkwell, and clasped his hands behind his head.

"It's an amusing problem," he said. "Why would you buy an outboard motor costing \$92.85 and pay for it with stamps?"

"I wouldn't," I said instantly.

"Well, suppose you did. What then? If the reason you paid in stamps was that you didn't have a checking account, then you wouldn't be paying for it all at once, would you? You'd be buying your motor on the installment plan as Roebuck and Ward so generously allows you to do."

"Unless," I suggested, "you had no faith in banks and keep coin of the realm in an old sock under your mattress."

"But in that case," said Peel, "why not a money order? Much safer."

"You guess," I said. "I'm tired. I've been working."

"And that's not the only thing he bought either," said Peel. "Wait a minute. Here it is: Mr. Mortimer J. Smith, Havre de Grace. Here's a slicker suit, to go with the outboard motor and a——"

He broke off and sat staring, his mouth still open, his eyes starting out of his head, his breath caught in his throat.

The skin at the back of my neck crawled.

"And a—what?" I asked.

"And a glass kerosene lamp," he said softly. He turned his face to me. It was blazing with a sudden, passionate intelligence.

He reached a hand into a drawer of his desk and drew out a fat Roebuck and Ward catalogue. He had got it two weeks before when he was checking up the origin of the glass lamp. He turned the pages swiftly. I leaned over his shoulder, breathless. At last he found it—a page full of pictures of different types of kerosene and gasoline lamps.

Peel looked back at the typed form, and repeated the catalogue number of the lamp under his breath.

"137 K 329." A quick glance checked it in the book. It was the same type of lamp as the one found in the house on the Frederick road.

"The glass shade was bought separately," said Peel, and he checked that, too. There could be no doubt of it. The lamp ordered by Mr. Mortimer J. Smith on February first was identical in every respect with the lamp that was, at that moment, locked up in Peel's safe.

Peel stared at the picture in the catalogue with the look of a man who doubts the evidence of his senses. Then he flung the book back in the drawer and picked up the typed forms. His hands were shaking.

"Peel!" I cried.

He didn't look at me. His voice was shaking, too, when he answered:

"Jonas, this is the act of God."

For a moment he sat with his eyes closed, the palm of his hand pressed back against his forehead. Then

he flung the papers down and thrust a pencil and a clean sheet of paper in front of me.

"You make a list," he said. "These go back several months. I'll read you off all the articles purchased by Mr. Mortimer J. Smith."

The list, when I completed it, was a curious one:

1 man's wrist watch	21.95
1 safety razor	2.79
6 pairs canvas gloves	.99
6 pairs black cotton hose	.86
4 cotton flannel shirts	4.39
1 windbreaker coat	5.49
6 white broadcloth shirts	3.75
12 large handkerchiefs	1.00
1 leather belt	.42
1 corduroy cap	.65
1 pair brown oxfords	4.59
1 pair black oxfords	4.59
1 pair rubber-soled shoes	2.95
1 pair garters	.15
1 corduroy slacks	1.98
1 brown overcoat	5.95
1 gray felt hat	.95
1 check weave suit	8.95
3 cotton pyjamas	2.75
1 capeskin gloves	1.69
4 shirts	1.59
4 shorts	1.59
1 black suitcase	3.95
1 outboard motor	92.85
1 kerosene lantern	2.98
1 two-piece slicker suit	2.49
1 glass kerosene lamp	1.50
1 white glass lampshade	.79

My heart was thumping painfully when we finished.

"The brown overcoat and gray hat," I said.

Peel nodded, without looking up. He sat rigid, like a man turned to stone. Then he said in a low voice:

"Jonas, why did Mr. Mortimer J. Smith buy two pair of shoes, one size eight B and one size ten D?"

"Good God!" I gasped. "The footprints behind the shrubbery at the Thompson house were size ten."

"That was just a guess, but we can make sure. Bullitt has moulds of them. Eight must be his right size. A man can't get his foot into a shoe that's too small—and besides, he bought two pair, at size eight. Jonas, I've got him. I've got him at last!"

His breath came short and heavy. His face was bloodless and drawn.

"But the other stuff," I said. "What did he want all that for?"

"Look at it!" He thrust the list at me. "What do you make of it?"

I shook my head confusedly. Peel got to his feet and began to pace back and forth, but it was no longer the restless prison gait of an animal behind bars; it was a purposeful stride.

"It's a complete outfit, Jonas, even to the handkerchiefs. If you left everything you owned behind you, you could get along very comfortably for weeks—months—with just the things included in that list. There are clothes for town and—there are clothes to wear on a boat. Not a big boat. A boat with an outboard motor."

"By Jove! I believe you're right!"

"Of course I'm right! What else does it tell us?"

He picked up the lists again and studied them.

"A man of medium size. Here, Jonas, take down these measurements."

I jotted them down at his dictation and he put the slip of paper in his pocket.

"The dates," he went on. "The dates tally. Most of the things were bought well before Jenkins' death—in November. The motor was bought in January, and the lamp on February first."

"But why did he pay for the stuff with stamps?"

"Because he thought they couldn't possibly be traced. No doubt he's been buying them inconspicuously for some time. His cheque, of course, was out of the question. A money order—well, the clerk might recognise him, or at any rate remember him. There would always be the question of identification. Stamps no doubt seemed so simple. He didn't know that sales of that sort are reported. Not many people know that."

"You think it's the gardener—Parsons?"

"It looks like it," said Peel. "If it weren't so wildly improbable, I'd say it was Parsons."

"Where'd he get the money?"

"Maybe that precious son-in-law of his—the Mexican—staked him for a share of the profits. I don't know. But I'm going to find out."

He reached for his coat and hat.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to see Tony, the shoemaker."

But before he went he snipped two items out of the catalogue. He took some money out of the safe and went into Scott's room. I followed him curiously.

Scott took his feet off the desk. He looked intently at Peel, but said nothing. Peel laid the clippings before him.

"Run over to Roebuck and Ward's and get me a couple of pairs of these, will you?" Peel said. "I want 'em to-night. Size eight and size ten. You needn't buy the wrist watch, but have a look at it so you'll know it when you see it again."

Scott looked at the slips and he looked at Peel. He put his hat on and went out, sticking his arms into the sleeves of his coat as he went.

Peel looked into Macready's office. There was no one there. He spoke to the telephone girl.

"Macready gone home?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get him for me."

She plugged in and spoke into the phone. After a moment she said:

"He's on the wire, Inspector."

"I'll take it in my office."

Peel went in and shut the door.

When we got to the shoemaker's on Keswick Road, Tony was eating his supper in the back of the shop: a hunk of cheese, the end of a loaf, a glass of beer. He greeted us eagerly. He was worried about his friend.

"You know something perhaps, Inspector?"

"Not yet," Peel told him. "But I'm working on a new line. Maybe you can help. You've heard nothing from Parsons?"

"No, sir. Nothing at all."

"What size shoe did he wear?"

"Eight A."

"You're sure?"

"Of course, sir. I mend them for him many times."

"Eight A? Sure it wasn't eight B?"

Tony shrugged.

"It could be eight B. Some lasts one must buy a wider shoe. But now he has only two pairs—and both those two I have seen. They are both A, sir."

We bade him good-night and went round to Parsons' boarding-house. The dour landlady let us in. She even seemed disposed to be conciliating.

"Oh, sir," she said to Peel, "haven't they found him yet?"

"Not yet."

He brushed past her to the stairs.

"I want to look at his room," he said. "You needn't come up."

There was only one suit hanging under a curtain against the wall. Peel took out a measuring tape and measured it carefully, comparing the results with the figures on the slip of paper in his pocket.

"Right?" I asked when he had finished.

"Near enough. I'm not a tailor." And he sighed as though this were a matter of regret. For a moment he stood frowning at the floor. Then he picked up a pair of shoes that stood under the curtain. "Tony's right," he said. "Eight A. Now why the hell did he order eight B?"

"Maybe he thought, since they were cheap shoes, he'd better get a size wider," I suggested lamely.

Peel grinned at me.

"Ever pay less than fourteen dollars for a pair of shoes, Jonas?"

"What's that got to do with it?" I demanded irritably.

"And then, of course," Peel went on, "he always wore cheap shoes."

He abandoned the subject, pulled open the drawers of the small bureau, and made a swift examination of the modest supply of shirts and underwear. When he was at last satisfied we went out again into the cold, windy dark.

"Melzner says that Thompson was chloroformed before he was killed," said Peel, apropos of nothing, as we got into his car.

"Oh, yes," I said. "So I heard."

"Bullitt's located the chloroform."

I had not known that, and said so.

"There was a cat at the Thompson house that had kittens a while ago. They got some chloroform so Parsons could get rid of 'em, but he found homes for 'em instead and the chloroform wasn't used. Stevens says that it stood on a shelf in the garage for quite a while. But it's not there now."

CHAPTER XXIII

Monday, March 12. 6.30 p.m.

PEEL agreed to go home with me for dinner, absent-mindedly, as though he were thinking of something else. I think he'd forgotten that Lucy was staying with us. At any rate, when he saw her he looked as though he wanted to turn and run, but he didn't. Instead he took her hand.

"Can you be patient another twenty-four hours?" he asked her.

Lucy got as white as a sheet.

"Have you got something?" she asked. She was clinging to him with both hands, but I don't think she knew it.

"I've got the whole case," said Peel quietly, "with the exception of one twist that I can't straighten. But I will. It's there, staring me in the face—but I haven't seen it—yet."

"Mordaunt!" cried Violet in a tight, strangled little voice.

I put my hand on her arm and she subsided.

"Who did it?" asked Lucy.

"I don't know," said Peel softly. "He's there—right under my eyes, but I can't see his face. I know

that he's middle-aged and of medium height and build. I know that he's got a black suit-case and a white gold wrist watch. I could tell you what he's wearing and what's in his suit-case—but I can't tell you his name."

He spoke softly, in a curious, expressionless voice, as though he were afraid of breaking some spell; as though he were on the verge of discovery, if only he did not lose his train of thought.

"It's so obvious," he said. "It must be one of those things that's so obvious that you can't see it."

We sat around him, almost without breathing. Lucy's eyes were fixed on him with an incredulous, breathless look, hope struggling painfully with despair. Violet's face burned with excitement. Her eyes were black with it. I thought, with a sudden pang of pleasure, how extremely pretty she was.

"I think I'll tell you a story," said Peel. He took a cigarette and lit it, and smiled down into Violet's eager face. "Shall I?"

"A nice, bedtime story," cooed Violet. "All about murderers and thieves."

"Once upon a time," began Peel softly, "a Western Union messenger boy lost the two last fingers on his left hand. He may have been a victim of the glorious fourth; he may not. It's immaterial. What matters is that he lost his fingers."

"Why does it matter?" breathed Violet.

"Because it made him self-conscious. He began to notice hands—their shape, size, general character. He got interested in hands. If he hadn't, there's a good chance that Philip Radnor would actually have paid for a crime he didn't commit."

Lucy spoke in a strangled voice.

"I can't stand this. Tell me, are you going to be able to save him?"

Peel bent over her remorsefully.

"My dear girl, I think so; I believe so. I don't see how I can fail—now."

She began to cry softly.

"Go on," said Violet.

"Remember," said Peel, "this is a fairy tale—something I've made up out of a few scattered—but nevertheless stubborn—facts, a little logic, and a few hunches. Bullitt would laugh at it."

"Bullitt isn't here," said Violet. "And we won't laugh."

For a moment Peel dropped his airy tone. He looked down at Violet.

"It started out pretty wild," he told her. "Almost entirely imagination. But every fact that's turned up has gone to prove some part of it is true. If this isn't the true story behind these crimes, I'll retire from the business. After all, one does acquire an instinct."

"Darling," said Violet, "you're telling *me*?"

"Of course," said Peel, "it's fairly obvious that the whole business centres round the Baltimore Midtown. After all, one can't dismiss a cool half-million dollars in favour of any other motive under heaven. So that's the heart of the matter—the possession of a half-million, fraudulently—and safely."

"I imagine that's where Jenkins came in. He had no connection with the bank or the money, so he must have had some connection with the safety. And Jenkins' character and line of business suggests that. He knew something—something that endangered the man who desired to possess the half-million. Maybe he was blackmailing our villain. Maybe not. Anyhow, he knew and he had to be eliminated."

"You know already what I think about that murder. I believe the murderer is some one who knew all about the stairway in the Sutter house. That he knew the Clapps and Philip Radnor and all about Jenkins' sit-

ting in Helen Clapp's studio. I believe he deliberately framed Radnor: took the automatic from his apartment, made the telephone appointment with Radnor so that he couldn't prove an alibi; made the appointment with Jenkins in Radnor's name, hoping he would mention—as indeed he did—whom he was going to meet. I believe the murderer then slipped into the Sutter house, met his man when he came downstairs, and shot him.

“He would no doubt have gone out the way he came in, but he heard a sound and he was afraid. The front door was under direct observation from the stairs; the rear door from the reception-room. He stepped back under the stairs and found that the door there opened. It was a choice of evils. He peered and listened. There seemed to be no one about. He slipped through. And then he realised he still held in his hand the pistol he had meant to leave beside Jenkins's body—Radnor's automatic. It was important in his scheme of involving Radnor. But he dared not go back. And then he saw Miss Wren's bag on the table. He thrust the pistol into it. It would certainly be discovered sometime—but not too soon. Not, at any rate, until he'd made his getaway. So he put it there and slipped out the back way through the garage. He was seen by the Clapps' butler, who could not, however, identify him.

“Our murderer then walked through the lane to Cathedral Street and along Monument to Howard, and there I lost him. And for nearly two months we hear no more of him and then——

“To go back for a moment. The first crime was preceded by two anonymous letters written by Matilda Wren in a praiseworthy effort to improve the morals of Baltimore society. It was a habit of hers. The odd thing is that she chose to use stationery belonging to Bessie Kingsley. She says she thought it the prettiest she'd ever seen.

" These letters really had no connection with the case. They were one of those fortunate accidents that occasionally reward a hard-working sleuth. But they were very bad business for our murderer, because they were the first thing that suggested to me a connection between the Jenkins murder and the disappearance of Lawrence Vincent. Which goes to show," added Peel virtuously, " that there ain't no justice. Because I was absolutely wrong in my first guess that there was a connection between the three letters because they were all written on the same paper. There was no connection except a purely accidental one. The murderer stole and used a sheet of Mrs. Kingsley's paper because he knew that Lawrence Vincent was in the habit of going to her apartment, and he thought it would give the police something to chew on if the letter warning Thompson of Vincent's impending departure appeared to have been written by her. He didn't know we already were tearing our hair over Matilda Wren's unsolicited correspondence."

" You're getting ahead of yourself, darling," said Violet.

" So I am. Well, we come to Vincent's disappearance. Our murderer has made away with the cash and is ready for his getaway. He knows it must be soon, for in the natural course of events the bank examiner is due in a short time. So he goes through this rigmarole of reserving a passage for Mr. Gerald Sargent on the *Santa Ana* and does it in such a way, and in such an obvious disguise that, when the police investigate, they will think the man was Lawrence Vincent. If you remember, he, too, is of medium height and build and of middle-age. And the police did think so. I might have thought so myself except that, like our messenger boy, I too notice hands, and I knew that Mr. Lawrence Vincent's hands were not small and thin and like a woman's.

" Then the scheme is ripe. Our murderer waits for a

convenient evening. He composes his anonymous letter warning Mr. Thompson of Vincent's imminent departure and mails it. Then he lures Mr. Vincent from home with some sort of fake phone call, takes him off to a convenient spot, kills him, and disposes of the body."

"Mordaunt!" cried Violet in horror.

"Of course, my dear. Surely you must have figured that out. How else could he assure that Vincent wouldn't pop up and spoil his plans? Of course he figures it out that Vincent's disappearance will explain the disappearance of the cash. The police, with their well-known pertinacity will continue over a period of years to look for him, without success. And our murderer will enjoy possession of the cash, unmolested.

"And now we come to the strange part—the part that doesn't fit. Why, in the name of all that's wonderful, did he jeopardise the safe possession of half a million dollars for a paltry seventy thousand? It doesn't make sense, yet we know he did, for there is reason to believe the two kidnapping letters were printed by the same hand that printed the letter about Vincent. But why? It's insane. You'd expect——"

He broke off. He was silent so long that Violet said at last:

"You'd expect—what?"

"Good God!" muttered Peel.

Violet could not contain herself. She sprang up.

"Mordaunt! Listen to me. What would you expect?"

He looked at her then, and there was a glow in his eyes that I knew of old.

"You'd expect that he'd do exactly what he did. You'd expect he'd write that letter and kidnap Thompson and make off with the ransom money. I ought to have known it the minute I laid eyes on those lists from

Roebuck and Ward. But I'm a fool, an idiot, a congenital imbecile."

"Mordaunt!" cried Violet, shaking him. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking sense for the first time in weeks. I've got it. I've got it by the tail. Coming, Jonas?"

And we dashed downstairs leaving Violet with her mouth open for a protest that was never spoken.

I caught him up as he was warming up the engine.

"Where are we going?" I demanded, climbing in beside him.

"We're going to Tony's first."

"But we've just come from there."

"Right the first time," he said. "But there was something we didn't ask him. I knew there was, but I couldn't think what. And now," he finished grimly, "I know."

"What are you going to ask him?"

"I'm going to ask him whether Parsons wore false teeth."

I will always remember that night as a confused nightmare of frantic motion. We had no dinner—neither of us thought of it—and this may have contributed to the sense of light-headed unreality.

We drove first to Tony's and found him nodding over his evening paper. He looked both surprised and bewildered when questioned about Parsons' teeth, but he answered readily enough. Yes, he used false teeth. He had a beautiful set made last summer. He had rheumatism and the doctor had advised having his teeth out.

He had hardly finished speaking when Peel was out of the shop again with me at his heels. We drove till we came to a drugstore. Peel got out and through the window I could see him enter the telephone booth and shut the door.

Ten minutes later we were in Bullitt's office. Bullitt was waiting for us, and Scott with a paper package under his arm. They looked a little bewildered.

"Got the plaster casts of those footprints in Thompson's yard?" Peel asked without preamble.

Bullitt produced them from a locked cupboard. Peel took the package from Scott and cut the string. The two pairs of shoes rolled out on the desk.

"What the hell?" said Bullitt.

Peel selected one of the plaster casts—the print of a right shoe—and fitted into it the right shoe of the pair marked 10 D. It fitted to a hair's breadth, except that the heel was not worn down. Peel took it out and examined the cast carefully.

"He must have worn the heel down with sandpaper," he said. "If you'll notice, the sole is new. The edges are sharp. Should have noticed it before."

Bullitt was looking at the shoes.

"But these are brand new. The heels haven't been touched."

"Of course they're new. Scott bought them at Roebuck and Ward's not an hour ago."

"So what?"

"Figure on it," said Peel grimly. "I'll call you in half an hour. Better have a fast car and half-a-dozen men on hand." He headed for the door but in the doorway he turned. "Oh, and by the way, don't forget to bring a warrant with you." And he grinned.

Bullitt hurried after him.

"What name?"

"John Doe," Peel called back.

We left Bullitt swearing helplessly.

Scott went with us. We drove along Charles Street, through the shopping district, dim and deserted at this time of night, and drew up in front of a store. The windows were dark but a light was burning inside. I could

see it was the tailoring and outfitting establishment of Herman Rouse.

"Wait for me," said Peel. "I won't be long."

He knocked on the door and after a moment it was opened by an elderly man in a dinner coat.

"I'm sorry to drag you down here," I heard Peel say.

"Not at all, Inspector. Delighted to be——"

The door closed. Scott and I waited.

"What's the Inspector's line?" asked Scott. "He's on a hot one, that's plain."

"Damned if I know," I said irritably. "He says he's solved the Jenkins murder, the Vincent disappearance, and the Thompson kidnapping, all in one."

"Then he's done it," said Scott, whose devotion to Peel was absolute. "Golly!"

Peel came out, and I saw at once that his notion had clicked. There was a set to his shoulders, a spring in his walk. He got in and slammed the door. He offered no explanation and I asked none. I was perishing with curiosity, for I guessed, of course, that this concerned those measurements which Peel had taken from the Roebuck and Ward reports. But I knew that this was not the moment for questions.

Peel sought a telephone booth once more. When he came back he was grinning.

"Bullitt's going to meet us," he said, "if he doesn't burst a blood-vessel first."

And then he relapsed into silence, while the car, leaping through the quiet streets, took and held the road for Havre de Grace.

CHAPTER XXIV

Monday, March 12. 10 p.m.

I HAD been many times to the races in this quiet water-side town. To me it had always been a background for colourful crowds, waving pennants, the grandstand full of women in smart dresses, the paddock full of thoroughbreds, the pandemonium of the pari-mutuel rooms, and the crowning, thrilling spectacle of the finest horseflesh in the country pitting their prowess each against each before fifty-thousand people in the throes of delirium.

I had never before seen Havre de Grace on a cold March night, the great race track silent and desolate, the streets deserted, and the water beyond cold and dark as steel.

We drove at once to the police station and found Macready waiting for us.

"Any luck?" Peel asked.

"I found the fellow that sold him the boat," Macready answered. "A man named Bacher. He says a Mr. M. J. Smith bought a boat from him last November, a small boat, only about twenty feet. It had a motor, but it was old and not much good. Mr. Smith had it taken out and the boat painted and fixed up. About the middle of January an outboard motor arrived from Roebuck and Ward. About two weeks ago—February twenty-third, Mr. M. J. Smith arrived in a brown overcoat and a light gray fedora, and carrying a black suitcase."

"You're sure," said Peel, "it was February twenty-third."

Macready was sure.

"The day after the ransom was paid."

“ Well? ”

“ He came about eight-thirty in the morning, in an old Ford car—the car’s still there, by the way. He changed at Bacher’s place into some clothes he had there, put his stuff into the boat and a box of food he’d brought with him, and shoved off. Bacher hasn’t seen or heard from him since. ”

“ Got a description of the boat? ”

“ Yes, flat stern, painted black with a white line. ”

“ Good lad! ” said Peel.

A stout man with a very red face, who turned out to be Mr. Reuben Hazleby, J.P., the local representative of the law, now took a hand in the proceedings.

“ There’s a revenue boat you can have, if you want it, Inspector. I’ve just talked to Captain Robins, and he’s standing by. ”

“ Fine, ” said Peel. “ We’ll go down to Bacher’s place, ” he told Macready. “ You wait for Bullitt and bring him along. ”

We got back in the car with Mr. Hazleby’s son Charlie to show us the way.

Bacher’s place turned out to be a ramshackle little boatyard, with half-a-dozen decrepit looking craft for sale. His house was hardly more than a shack, unpainted and dilapidated.

Bacher himself was waiting up for us. He opened the door at once and let us into a small sitting-room, incredibly stuffy with a coal stove going full blast.

He was a weazened little man of indeterminate age, and evidently in a state of extreme terror. He began protesting as soon as we got inside the door. Singling out Peel as the man in charge, he addressed him whiningly.

“ How was I to know there was anything wrong, sir? Such a nice, pleasant spoken man—a gentleman for sure. I said to him it was early to be going on a pleasure jaunt, but he said he liked to fool with boats

and wanted a week's quiet, or maybe two. I didn't think anything of it, sir. I swear to God I just thought he was one of these crazy fishermen."

"He had fishing tackle?"

"Bought some from me, sir, and some bait."

"Did any package besides the motor come here for him?"

"Yes, sir, a lot of packages. He left this address at the post office, and they delivered the stuff here. He'd come by every once in a while and pick it up. Some of it he left here—clothes he used when he was puttering on the boat and such."

"Corduroy slacks, corduroy cap, canvas shoes, wind-breaker coat?"

"Yes, sir."

"What colour?"

"Brown."

"When did the packages start coming?"

"Early in December—soon after he bought the boat."

"Did he tell you he planned to come back?"

"No, sir, but I reckoned he did, because he left his car here."

"The police will take charge of that."

"Yes, sir."

"And if you hear anything from Smith you are to notify Mr. Hazleby at once."

"Yes, sir."

We sat down to wait. Bacher made some coffee on the stove and produced the heel of a cold ham and some dry bread.

Bullitt and his men came in a little later, and he and Peel held some low-voiced conversation in a corner. I was drowsy: The long drive, the extreme heat of the room. I tilted my chair back against the wall and fell into an uneasy doze.

I was vaguely aware of figures moving about and

voices; of the door opening now and again to admit a breath of cold, sweet air and then closing, shutting in the stuffy heat. Once, through half-open eyes, I saw Peel and Bullitt bending over a map spread on the little table, in earnest consultation with Bacher. I heard a series of disconnected names, lovely and remote: Sassafra River, Reed's Creek, Trumpington. And then I must have fallen really asleep for the next thing I remember was being roused by Peel's hand on my shoulder to find the room empty except for Peel and Bacher.

"Hullo!" I said. "What time is it?"

"Five o'clock. Are you game for a trip down the bay, Jonas? Or would you rather go home?"

"I'm going with you," I said, rising to stretch my cramped muscles.

There was a pot of coffee on the table and the air was fragrant with frying bacon and eggs.

It seemed to me I had never eaten anything as delicious as that hasty, enormous breakfast in that dingy little room with its guttering lamp.

"Where's every one gone?" I asked, between mouthfuls.

"We've divided up the shoreline, down as far as the Chester. He's not likely to have got farther than that, if his object is to lie doggo in inconspicuous spots, fishing—as seems probable from the size of his boat and the fact that he took tackle along."

"So what?" I asked.

"Bullitt's taken the revenue boat and will work along from Poole's Island light to the Chester and Reed's Creek. Macready, with a couple of Bullitt's men, have taken a launch and will comb out the Sassafra. Quinn's gone up the Susquehanna, and Scott's taken the western shore as far as the Patapsco. I must say I think that's very unlikely, but one has to cover it. And Bacher's going to take us up Elk River."

He drank off the last of his coffee and stood up.

"And I'll lay you ten to one, that that's where we'll find him."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because it's not very far away, and yet there's a lot of lonely, deserted country. A man could fish and boat around there for weeks at this time of the year and never be noticed—and he could probably find a deserted cabin to sleep in. It's perfect country for his purpose—and yet, as I said, it's not far away. This isn't the time of year to be making a long voyage in an open, twenty-foot boat."

"I should think," I objected, "that he'd want to put as much ground as possible behind him."

"That will come later," said Peel, "When——" He broke off and looked at me with a provoking grin.

"When—what?"

"I must have my climax, Jonas. I won't spoil it."

"Very well," I said huffily. "I'm ready if you are."

We wrapped ourselves up and went out into the pitch darkness of a cold, windless morning. Bacher had an electric torch, and he lighted us down the long, grass grown pier to the end where a ramshackle open launch, about thirty feet long, was moored in readiness.

"She don't look like much," said Bacher proudly, "but she sure can do her stuff."

He climbed down into the cockpit and Peel and I followed him. Three minutes later we were headed across the mouth of the Susquehanna toward Perry's Point.

Behind us the unwinking green eye of the Havre de Grace lighthouse pierced the dark. To our left the lights on the high bridges hung like beads of fire strung on dark, almost invisible threads. Ahead of us and to our right the bleak, steely surface of the bay stretched to

a hardly visible black pencil mark that was the Eastern Shore.

It began to get light as we circled Perry's Point. The low, grouped buildings of the hospital became visible. The colour of the bay changed from steel gray to steel blue and a line of fiery light dazzled our eyes as we chugged eastward toward Charlestown.

The clouds, which had covered the sky when we left Havre de Grace, had long since broken into long streamers that moved lazily on a wind we could not feel. Now they caught the light and flamed in every shade of gold and crimson: an army with banners.

"You'd better edge in nearer the shore," said Peel, above the noise of the engine. "As close as you safely can."

Bacher nodded, and for a long time we rode in silence. Peel, in the bow, held a pair of binoculars, and every now and then raised them to his eyes and studied the shore.

Bacher had not exaggerated the qualities of his boat. We made good time. And she was admirably fitted for this sort of work, for she drew very little water and we were able to poke our noses into creeks and inlets that would have bogged a bigger boat.

We jogged along the shore up to Charlestown and back again to Turkey's Point. And then, in the early afternoon, we turned up the Elk River.

The day had been beautiful so far, cold but still and clear and there was a warmth in the sun that made me realise for the first time that spring was at hand, even though there were as yet, no visible signs of it. But now the clouds piled up again and wind, cold and cutting, came down the river to meet us. We drew our mufflers closer and shivered.

Under any other circumstances the scene around us would have been both beautiful and interesting. But

under that bleak sky, the flat, weedy shores looked indescribably desolate. The lift of adventure was gone and the sick suspense of a delayed climax had taken its place. I do not remember feeling fatigue, but only a sort of dull trance-like discomfort and a growing, numbing disappointment as hour after hour passed without success.

I could detect no change in Peel. He still sat in the bow, his thin, sharp face turned intently toward the nearest shore, his hand automatically raising and lowering the glasses. He looked as though he could go on forever, if necessary, unshaken and untired.

The northwest shore of the Elk drew no results and we turned back, Peel transferring his attention to the southeast bank. I moved up and sat beside him.

"Looks as though you'd guessed wrong," I said.

"Maybe. I'll have another sandwich."

He had one, and a nip out of my flask.

Time passed.

"That will be old Frenchtown," he said at last, nodding toward the shore.

And then, a little later, he said:

"It's an eternal wonder why some of these places don't fall down on the heads of the inmates. Look at that one!"

He gave me the glasses and I adjusted them to fit my eyes and looked.

It was a board shack, unpainted and weatherbeaten, and leaning crazily so that it had entirely parted company with its chimney; except at the bottom, where the fireplace fastened wall and chimney together. It stood at the edge of a lonely strip of brown marshland and as far as I could see boasted no road or any means of approach except by water. Yet it was undoubtedly inhabited for a thin wisp of smoke rose from the chimney and was blown away by the wind.

"Just the place for our—friend," said Peel, glancing sideways at me.

I felt my heart begin to thump painfully.

"You think——"

"I haven't seen any boat—yet," said Peel, taking the glasses from me and turning them again toward the cabin. "There seems to be a path of sorts leading down to that group of willows. Perhaps when we get round the bend——"

It seemed hours before we swung about into the creek, but it could not have been any more than ten minutes. And then we saw it—a black boat, hardly more than a rowboat, with a white band around it. It was drawn up on the marshy bank under the willow trees and attached to the stern, in a tarpaulin case, was the outboard motor.

Peel glanced at Bacher, who nodded, and Peel again transferred his attention to the shore. There was no human being to be seen. No sign of life except the smoke in the chimney.

Peel went back and consulted briefly with Bacher. I could see them arguing about something and then Bacher gave in with a shrug.

I joined them at a sign from Peel.

"Have your gun handy," he said, "the fellow will be desperate."

My hand found the comfortable, smooth bulk of the revolver in my overcoat pocket.

Meanwhile Bacher had turned the boat's nose toward the shore. He drove her head on, and a moment later her nose slid quietly to rest on the bank under the willows beside the black boat.

Peel jumped out and ripped the tarpaulin cover from the motor.

"That's the one," he said.

Bacher followed and stood beside him.

"It's the boat, all right," he said. "And that's the pail he had the bait in." He looked uneasily up at the shack. "I couldn't go with you," he said. "I—I guess I'd better stay with my boat."

Peel said nothing. He started up the path toward the shack and I limped after him.

The door was closed and the one window on our side was boarded up. About fifty yards away Peel stopped and we listened. There wasn't a sound, except the faint ripple of the water, and the faint rustle of the brown marsh grass under the wind. If you shut your eyes you would have believed yourself on a desert island, but we did not shut our eyes for the smoke continued to curl up out of the chimney and the door remained closed.

I think I have never been more uncomfortable. Shivers of cold and nervous tension were chasing each other up my spine. I was remembering, with uncomfortable vividness, the extreme neatness of the single shot which had killed Boyd Jenkins.

And there was, practically speaking, no cover. A hummock of dry grass here and there, and the stump of a willow which had, apparently, blown down in some recent wind and lay where it had fallen, some thirty yards from the house, bare and sprawling.

Peel called out suddenly:

"Hallo! Is any one there?"

For an instant there was silence. Then something was poked between the boards of the crazy window shutter. A bullet sang past us and the air was shattered by the detonations of the shot. A second shot followed the first, instantly. Peel had shot from the hip and a round black hole appeared in the shutter.

I flung myself down behind the nearest grass hummock. When I looked round I saw that Peel had made a dash for the willow stump and was crouching behind it. This had carried him off to one side, a little out of direct

range from the window. I saw him raise his head cautiously, and an instant later he made another dash, this time to the cabin itself, against the end wall by the chimney. For an instant he disappeared from view and then he reappeared, round the other end. Clearly this door and window were the only openings the cabin afforded.

He stood against the wall and rapped with the nose of his revolver against the closed door.

"Open up!" he said. "Mr. Mortimer J. Smith, I hold a warrant for your arrest."

There was no sound at all from the cabin. If it were not for the curling smoke and the shot which had come from the window, one would have believed it deserted. Peel was listening intently, his ear against the wall. Suddenly he reached out and lifted the latch of the door. It seemed to be bolted, for the door would not open. He stood back a pace and swung his foot up in a ferocious arc.

I could hear the rotten wood tear and Peel went down sideways. For an instant I saw a figure standing in the doorway, holding a gun which spat with futile rage over Peel's head. But it was only for an instant. I was a good shot in the army and my hand has not lost the knack. I caught him in the right shoulder, and he spun round and went down, heavily.

A moment later, limping up to the cabin, I found Peel bending over him.

"It's all right, Jonas," he said, "you just nicked him. He isn't even out."

"Who is it?" I asked and my voice sounded strange in my own ears.

Peel stood back and I found myself staring down into an unshaven face so distorted with rage and terror that for an instant I did not recognise—Winslow Thompson.

CHAPTER XXV

Tuesday, March 20.

A WEEK after the arrest of Winslow Thompson, Violet gave a dinner party. She does not often go in for such social observances but when she does her parties are always delightful, for, without regard for any other considerations, she invites only the people who would like to meet each other. I remember the charming luncheon she gave for Peel's old friend, Alicia Marvell. We had a wonderful time. Violet insisted on asking Anton Schwarz, a Swiss furniture maker who keeps a junk shop on South Howard Street. I have never seen Alicia enjoy herself more. Schwarz is positively the most prodigious liar, and one of the most charming and tactful conversationalists I have ever met. We talked all afternoon, I remember, and suddenly discovered with astonishment that it was dark.

But that is beside the point.

As I was saying, Violet gave a dinner party. Peel was to be there; and Lucy Shanks.

"Commissioner Mottram, of course, and Sergeant Bullitt," Violet went on. "That's all, I think, Jonas?"

"All except——"

"Yes," said Violet, and her voice shook. "All except——"

And across the bottom of the page she printed in large capitals: Philip Radnor.

She turned from her desk and looked at me, her pretty eyes swimming with tears.

"Oh, Jonas—I—I'm so happy!"

And she flung herself down beside my chair, put her head on my knee, and cried as though her heart would break.

Radnor was to be released on the morning of the day set for the dinner. Thompson, confronted with the case against him, had made a full confession, exonerating Radnor and proving Peel right in every particular. His confession, which laid bare the tortuous motive behind the series of crimes, supplied also the one missing link in the chain—the motive for Jenkins's murder.

It was a curious—I had almost said an incredible—story, and its beginnings dated back twenty years and more, when the impeccable Winslow Thompson, bank president and pillar of respectability, was a young man making his way in the world. He had been, at twenty-five, a teller in the Baltimore Midtown, and a rigidly perfect young man, without any of the pleasant, amiable weaknesses of his age as he was without close friends. He neither drank, smoked, nor kept questionable company. He saved his money and was secretly filled with the bitter envy of the virtuous for his more prodigal contemporaries. Niggardly and thin in mind and body, he lacked any gift for living. His nature held him in a vice. He could only come to terms with life by swearing to himself that some day, somehow, he would make a fortune and live with a spacious display that would never be realised by these young fellows who spent as they made without thought of the future. The idea became a secret passion that dominated his thoughts, a kind of megalomania, fostered by his festering sense of social inferiority and impotence.

He had saved some money and now he began to speculate with it on the side, very cautiously, very carefully, for he realised that it would prejudice his chances of advancement if it became known. He opened a private account with a broker in New York, under the name of Cyrus Stone, which he had maintained ever since. And he had had extraordinary luck, for he was shrewd and cautious, even in the practice of this secret vice.

But long immunity from disaster had made him bold, and he caught the common delusion of eternal prosperity that swept the country in '28. He became reckless and when the crash came in '29 he faced complete ruin. He could not face it. He had nothing to fall back on if fortune failed him. He began to cover his losses by using the money entrusted to him by the various organisations whose funds he controlled. Peel's guess had been closer to the truth than he dreamed. Thompson had pilfered in all a great deal of money and had doctored the books to clear himself of suspicion.

And then the idea had come to him. He would never feel safe now. There was always the chance that his sins might find him out. Why not make himself safe? Why not take a substantial sum—something that would justify the extraordinary risks he was running—and clear out—disappear? But he would be followed. The police would never rest in a case like that. All his life he would be hearing their tread behind him. Unless——

He dallied with the idea and gradually the solution came to him. He had little to lose—neither family nor close friends. A lonely man obsessed by his dream.

Gradually, more as an intellectual exercise than as a plan destined for practical execution, he began to plot the perfect crime. His mind lingered lovingly over its details. And at last it began to seem feasible.

The reward tantalised him unbearably. His official "death," well authenticated and established, and afterwards freedom and a new life, colourful and satisfying.

He realised that the success of his plan depended on the perfect functioning of all its parts. It could only succeed if no glance of suspicion was ever turned in his direction. There must be no question that it was really he who died. And therefore his record must show no possible stain, no conceivable motive for a voluntary disappearance.

But his reputation was immaculate—above reproach. No one—no one in all the world—knew that Cyrus Stone and Winslow Thompson were one and the same man.

And then Boyd Jenkins found out.

It happened through one of those incredible chances that upset the best laid plans. Thompson had gone to New York on what was to be his final trip, to settle and close out the Cyrus Stone account. He had finished his business and gone into the Commodore Grill to dine alone before taking the train back to Baltimore. And a few tables away, Barker, one of the partners in the brokerage firm with which he had concluded his business, was dining with Boyd Jenkins.

They had been amusing themselves by identifying as many as possible of the people in the room. Jenkins was one of those fellows who knew everybody. Barker pointed out Thompson and detailed for the amusement of his guest some of Mr. Cyrus Stone's more spectacular adventures.

Jenkins had been amused. The next week he went to Baltimore to take up his new job there and discovered that Cyrus Stone was identical with Winslow Thompson, respectable president of Baltimore's most respectable bank. Jenkins was more than amused. He was interested. He even took it on himself to point out the amusing features of the situation to Thompson. He did not know that he was signing his own death warrant. He took the money Thompson paid him and smiled amiably. Thompson did not smile. He waited his opportunity.

For a long, exasperating year he paid and waited while he perfected the practical details of his plan, selected his victims and bought from Roebuck and Ward the things he needed.

He acquired possession of Radnor's automatic. Months before he had seen it in Radnor's apartment and he

knew where it was kept. Now he took advantage of a cocktail party to possess himself of it. And again he waited. Luck played into his hands. Radnor's quarrel at the Haviland Street Club gave him his opportunity. He framed Radnor and he eliminated Jenkins.

His alibi for this crime was true enough as far as it went. He did try to get a taxi, believing—as turned out to be the case—that it would be impossible to do so. But instead of walking to his tailor's, he had gone round the corner, gotten into the second-hand Ford sedan which he had in readiness, slipped on his brown coat and gray hat, driven to Howard and Monument streets. Here he had parked his car, walked over to Cathedral, put in his telephone call to Jenkins in Radnor's name at the drug store, and walked to the Sutter house. After the crime had been committed and he had escaped through the back door of the Clapp house, he had gone out through the lane, retrieved his car, and driven round to Herman Rouse's shop. Here again he had parked his car and left it, until such time as it might be convenient to get it again. The thing was done.

He waited for several weeks until the affair had died down and he believed himself safe. Then he began to carry out his scheme.

It was simple enough—the trick of reserving passage on the *Santa Ana* in such a way that the police would believe that Lawrence Vincent had done it, but how to put the police on Vincent's track? The idea of an anonymous letter occurred to him. He knew that both Vincent and George Sutter were in the habit of going to Mrs. Kingsley's apartment, so he suggested casually to Vincent that he'd like to meet her. Vincent took him along to one of her parties and Thompson stole a sheet of her writing paper from her desk. He realised as soon as he saw it that the police, investigating Vincent's background, could hardly fail to identify such distinctive

paper. He hoped they would think that Bessie Kingsley had written the letter warning them of Vincent's supposed departure.

This had been weeks before the crime. And it had been a very rowdy party. No one remembered that he had been there. And Vincent, who had taken him there, was dead. It was all very simple.

He had met with extraordinary—almost appalling—success. There was something horribly callous and shocking in the way he admitted the killing of Lawrence Vincent and the disposal of his body in a grave already dug and waiting. He gave careful directions and the police had no difficulty in finding the body in a ravine, about half a mile from the house on the Frederick road.

And then came the climax of the crime—the feature that stamped it, after all, as the work of real, if perverted genius—the fake kidnapping—the kidnapping that was destined to authenticate his death and leave him safe and free forever.

The difficulty was to find a victim to double for him. It had to be some one whose body would be accepted without question for Thompson's. And this presented serious difficulties. It would be simple enough to disfigure the face so that it would be unrecognisable. But Thompson was too well-informed not to know that the police would go further than that. There was the question of a dentist's identification by means of the teeth.

The answer to his problem was suggested to Thompson, oddly enough, by his chance discovery that Jim Parsons, his gardener, had had all his teeth pulled some months before, and wore a complete set of false teeth. Now Thompson himself wore false teeth. And false teeth can be substituted. He considered Parsons' more closely and realised that in general colouring and build they were much alike. His plan began to take shape.

How he wrote himself the threatening letter and

pushed it under the door sill, wrote and mailed the letter demanding ransom, planted the footsteps beside his front door, and fired the shot into the door frame; how he afterwards climbed down from his own window, after planting apparent traces of a forcible abduction; how he decoyed Parsons out into the house on the Frederick road, overcame him with chloroform taken from the shelf in the garage, battered him to an unrecognisable hulk and hid him in the rickety outhouse, was as macabre a tale as ever I heard.

At first he had not intended to make any effort to obtain the ransom money, but by that time success had gone to his head and it struck him as the crowning joke to realise all his remaining assets—the things he could not take away with him—and carry them with him in cash.

So he had actually waited in the woods by the gate until Sutter deposited the suitcase containing the ransom money. He had hastily changed the money into a bag he had with him and escaped by a path through the woods while Peel and I were watching the empty bag.

He had his Ford cached at some distance—three or four miles away in a wood road. He reached it safely, drove by a roundabout route to Havre de Grace, got into his boat and—vanished.

He believed himself perfectly safe. He intended to keep out of sight until he had grown a moustache and otherwise altered his appearance, and then he planned to make a get-away to the town in the middle west where he had deposited the stolen money under an assumed name.

Over and over, in that shack on the Elk River, he had rehearsed the affair. He could detect no flaw. He was safe.

What he must have felt when he saw Peel approaching!

Friday was a gorgeous day, warm and golden—a triumphant day. The flower sellers, who do so much to add to the charm of Baltimore in the spring, burst out like magic on the street corners. As Peel and I drove over to the jail to meet Radnor and take him home, my heart swelled in me with a profound elation, and Peel's face, for the first time in many weeks, was relaxed and at peace.

Radnor wrung Peel's hand, and for the moment was unable to speak. He stood in the street, drawing deep breaths of spring air, his white face turned up to the sunshine. Then he got hastily into the car.

Lucy was waiting for him at his apartment. She was standing in the open doorway as we went up the stairs. She didn't even see us. We went away and left them clinging together.

On the way home Peel bought flowers at every stand we passed. Violet was on the watch. She opened the door for us and Peel dumped the flowers into her arms. But he would not come in.

"A few last threads to tie," he said. "I'll see you to-night."

He went away, and Violet and I got through the day as best we could.

Moose was in his element. Reinforced by his sister, Maria, he spent the afternoon cooking such dishes as have never been seen on our table before or since. He would brook no interference or suggestions but from time to time Violet and I would tiptoe to the kitchen door, open it, and sniff.

Maria clattered about, making an unbelievable amount of noise, polishing silver, waxing furniture, and rubbing up the glassware. Maria is my pride and joy. Moose looks with shocked disapproval on her methods, but I will not have her tampered with. To see Maria, her broad black face wreathed in smiles, a serving tray

balanced on an expert, uplifted palm, hovering over our table, is one of my greatest pleasures. I adore Maria.

About four o'clock I cornered her in the pantry where she had been polishing the cocktail glasses. Maria and I have a common passion for P. G. Wodehouse. The ambition of her life is to go to England and see for herself whether people like that really exist. It seems to her in the highest degree improbable, but she is willing to be shown.

"A topping day, Maria," I suggested. "A bit of all right, what?"

Maria agreed with me that it was.

At dinner Peel refused to talk shop.

"This food," he said, "deserves the tribute of respectful attention."

And we waited, perforce, upon his pleasure.

It was a wonderful dinner, if I do say it. We were all a little uplifted because of the cocktails we had drunk and the very passable wine, but it was something more that filled us with that keen, if evanescent sense of the general rightness of the world.

I looked around the table at Bullitt's square, red face beaming above his bulging shirt front; at Mottram, no longer the harassed target for public attack but a handsome, impressive Pillar of the State; at Lucy Shanks and Philip Radnor—I must still call him Philip Radnor—who were obviously holding hands under the table, and had eyes only for each other; at Peel, relaxed and content, his job done, talking to Violet.

Violet! My eyes went back to her again and again. Pretty Violet, her tender eyes glowing with a generous joy, her bright hair shining. The centre, the rock on which my life is built! I toasted her silently and she smiled at me across the table.

But at last everything was cleared away and Maria

bounced in for the last time with the coffee and the liqueurs.

"Now," said Violet imperiously, "I want to know all about it from the beginning."

Peel leaned back in his chair and smiled at her.

"I will tell you a story," he said.

"The story," said Violet softly, "of how Inspector Peel made his case."

There was a tensing of interest around the table. One could feel it as Peel began with a smile:

"Once upon a time——"

We talked till the candles guttered in their sockets. Radnor and Lucy went away after a while. And Mott-ram left about one. But Peel and Violet, Bullitt and I talked till the gray light filtered through the curtains.

It was a very successful dinner party.

THE END

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